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Memory and the Evolution of Modern Performance Spaces: Preservation Approaches at Charleston's Memminger Auditorium and Riviera Theater

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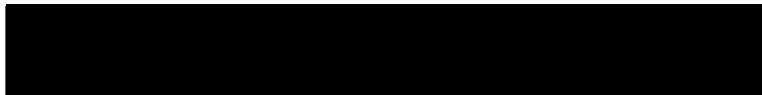
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May 5, 2006

To the Graduate School:

This thesis entitled "Memory and the Evolution of Modern Performance Spaces: Preservation Approaches at Charleston's Memminger Auditorium and Riviera Theater" and written by Adrienne Jacobsen is presented to the Graduate School of Clemson University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science with a major in Historic Preservation.



Ralph Muldrow, Thesis Advisor

We have reviewed this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Dan Nadenicek

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Jennie McStotts

Accepted for the Graduate School:



MEMORY AND THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN PERFORMANCE SPACES:
PRESERVATION APPROACHES AT CHARLESTON'S
MEMMINGER AUDITORIUM AND
RIVIERA THEATER

A Thesis

Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Historic Preservation

By
Adrienne Nicole Jacobsen

May 2006

Advisor: Professor Ralph Muldrow

ABSTRACT

Often in preservation, the building undergoing work is treated as an artifact, a symbol of a specific time period embodying a static identity. Subsequent use of this building helps capture a moment in time by respecting its history and raising awareness of the context in which it was constructed. However, this type of preservation reflects only what history has determined most worthy of maintaining. Though successful in its goal of preserving one era in perpetuity, preservation of a building as a museum piece denies its existence as an element that has evolved over time like a landscape, depending on the mandates of style and wishes of the owners.

In Charleston, the preservation method of the Memminger Auditorium, constructed in 1939, reflects the history and associated memories of the space. The decision to leave its exterior intact and interior in a condition of decay illustrates the layers of history present. The solution for a single-screen cinema completed the same year, the Riviera Theater, was that of adaptive use. However, unlike the Memminger, its completely restored appearance demonstrates preservation at the opposite end of the spectrum.

An additional parallel can be drawn to modern art; the box constructs of artist Joseph Cornell and the surrealist themes suggested therein reflect surrealists belief that process was more important than product. The very nature of the Memminger represents an artistic process as well as an architectural one. Therefore, as seen in the context of Cornell's boxes and the adaptive use of the Riviera Theater, the preservation approach of

the Memminger Auditorium reconciles the role memory plays in the architectural complexities of the space with the building's significance to 1930s Charleston.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to the following people and organizations, for one reason or another. Lest someone think they are less appreciated or remembered, the following thanks are in no particular order: everyone at The Carolina Room at the Charleston County Public Library and CCPL special collections manager Nic Butler, Lisa Reams at the South Carolina Historical Society, Karen Emmons of Historic Charleston Foundation, The Charleston Library Society, Sara Arnold of the Gibbes Museum, Sharon Bennett of the Charleston Museum, The College of Charleston Special Collections, Tommy Townsend at the Charleston County School District Archives, Bill Huey of Huey and Associates Architects, my neighbor Ron Rocz for his beautiful images of the Riviera(before and after restoration), Nancy at the Charleston Register of Mesne and Conveyence, my advisor Ralph Muldrow for great leads and greater advice, and three lovely ladies of the Memminger Normal School class of 1946: Carolee Rosen Fox, Dot Sires Jordan and Peggy Price Slackie. Thanks also to all of my friends who ever asked how my thesis was coming, to my fellow cherubs for support, my office family for keeping me in good spirits, my boss, Glenn Keyes, for keeping me fed, and to my parents, for everything.

INTRODUCTION

Buildings simultaneously contribute to history and memory; they act as instigators of subjective experiences, and history and memory are the conscious and unconscious effects that architecture provokes. In Charleston, the Riviera Theater and Memminger Auditorium illustrate these effects through opposing approaches to their preservation. Completed in 1939, both are highly significant to the city's modern landscape between the World Wars. Behind their mostly unaltered facades, the present activities within the Riviera and Memminger differ both respectively and from their originally intended uses. Products of the golden age of cinema, one-screen theaters such as the Riviera are now obsolete and present a challenge economically and architecturally. Built as both a gymnasium and a performance venue, the Memminger no longer houses basketball games for the associated high school, but it has re-established itself as an exceptional location for the performing arts.

Within the last decade, some form of preservation has been undertaken on each of these buildings. The different preservation approaches of Charleston's Riviera Theater and Memminger Auditorium represent the respective relationships of each building to the past and to the city at a particular moment in time. As a memory can never perfectly recreate events which have unfolded, the same may be said for preservation. Changes in codes, advancements in materials and construction technology, and different craftsmen result (optimistically) in the best possible architectural result, but could never hope to *exactly* replicate what previously existed. In *not* attempting to do so, the solution at the Memminger reflects a past which is within reach, yet its full re-creation is not essential to

its interpretation. That is to say, the Memminger can reference the past and provide meaning without being restored to its 1939 appearance both inside and out. “No account (of history) can recover the past as it was, because the past was not an account; it was a set of events and situations.”¹

Such events and situations are captured not only in the adaptation of a work of architecture, but in works of art as well, and the work of 20th century artist Joseph Cornell in particular. Amassing a remarkable collection of found objects, Cornell composed collages and assembled boxes containing the various artifacts he had accrued. His art embodies a sense of timelessness; the artifacts in the boxes are frozen in time. The way the objects are staged is similar to the role of props and performers on a stage. Cornell himself described the boxes as “poetic theaters.”² A series of boxes made around the same time the Memminger and Riviera were built reflects his “sensitivity to the devices and illusions used in set design.”³

¹ Lowenthal, David. The Past is a Foreign Country, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1985. p. 215.

² Hartigan, Lynda Roscoe et al. Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday, Thames and Hudson, New York: 2003. p. 10.

³ Hartigan, Lynda Roscoe et. al. Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday. CD-ROM. Washington, D.C: The Voyager Foundation, Inc, 2003.

CHARLESTON IN THE 1930S

Over sixty years ago, two consecutive years heralded the groundbreaking of two seemingly different theater buildings within blocks of each other. For 1938 and 1939, both designs were, in their time, contemporary responses to familiar stylistic languages, one classical, the other modern. The precedents may have been different, but the effect was the same: the emergence of these performance spaces in the heart of the historic commercial district represented a dynamic shift in the identities of the respective sites.

In the 1930s, the face of Charleston was changing. Recovering from the economic slump that had, in essence, lasted from Civil War Reconstruction through the 1920s, the subsequent renaissance in art and culture reinvigorated the city and introduced outsiders to the pleasures of the lowcountry.⁴ Most importantly for the local historic architecture, the Old and Historic District established in 1931 protected hundreds of residences south of Broad Street and in the French Quarter from demolition.⁵ The worst slum area, between Beaufain and Queen Streets near the Old Jail and Marine Hospital, was demolished to make way for a new housing complex.⁶ Designed by local preservation activist and University of Pennsylvania-trained architect Albert Simons, the Mills Manor

⁴ For more on the "Charleston Renaissance" see editors James Hutchisson and Harlan Greene's Renaissance in Charleston: Art and Life in the Carolina Lowcountry, 1900-1940, University of Georgia Press. Athens: 2003.

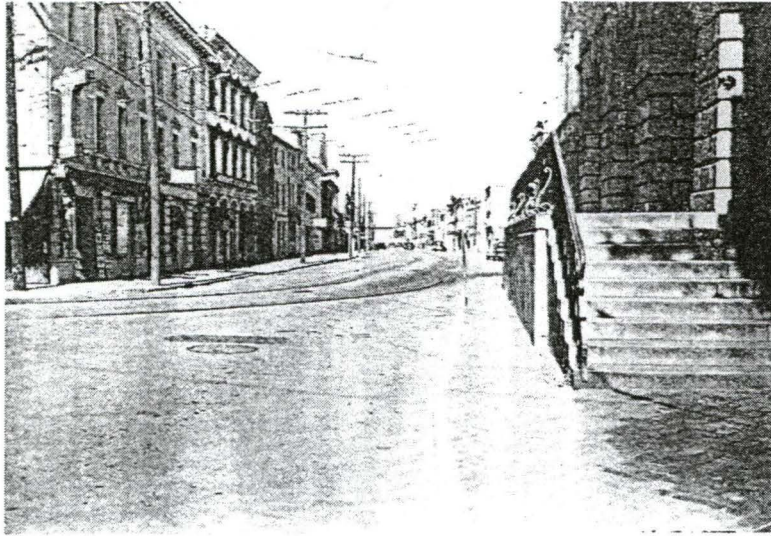
⁵ For a comprehensive explanation of Charleston's preservation efforts, see Charles B. Hosmer's Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1946, 2 Vols. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981) I and Robert R. Weyeneth, Historic Preservation for a Living City, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

⁶ See details in the City Year Book 1932-1935. South Carolina Historical Society. (SCHS) (All Charleston City Year Books identified in this manuscript were attained from the SCHS.)

Housing represented the city and federal governments' active roles in an evolving downtown. Local and out-of-state monies were crucial in shaping the face of the city between the First and Second World Wars. The awareness of architectural significance as well as the importance of preservation was on the rise thanks to local legislative and advocacy efforts.

Memories that Charlestonians who were alive in the thirties had of the city encompass issues ranging from the steadily growing city periphery to the numerous Works Progress Administration projects that improved living conditions citywide. Overall, there was a feeling of optimism and pride as things picked up after the depression. On May 8th, 1930, Mayor Samuel Galliard Stoney addressed Charleston, this being the first time by radio, in his annual review.⁷ He stated that Charleston had "gone steadily forward to commercial and industrial betterment without sacrificing its original colonial characteristics." There was an underlying sentiment that history and progress could co-exist, a sentiment that is alive and well today. Stoney continues by making an important observation: "in building for the present and the future it has not been unmindful of the fact that its most priceless assets are its heritages from the past." The address was made on the heels of the city's celebration of its two hundred fiftieth anniversary in April.

⁷ See the Charleston City Year Book of 1930 for the complete transcript.



1.1 Projects like the paving of roads were made possible through federal relief funds

Stoney expressed the superiority of Charleston's port as reflected by it being the headquarters of various U.S. government departments. Just six miles north of the city, the active naval yard was home to the Sixth Naval District, Sixth Lighthouse District, the only "first-class Navy Yard between Hampton Roads and San Francisco," and an Army Supply Base. Foreign trade comprised much of the port's traffic, while exports to other parts of the country also made Charleston an important stop on the national trading routes.

The growing population demanded a greater number of paved roads to access its ever expanding city limits.⁸ With the increase in fuel demand, five oil companies had distributing plants at the port and one, the Standard Oil Company, had a refinery. The

⁸ "Automobile, Bridge and Good Roads Speeds Up Movement of Population to Residential Areas North and West of the City," News and Courier, (Charleston) 14 February 1938. A map published with this article called "Do You Know Your Suburbs of Charleston?" indicates where new population centers were appearing.

presence of this refinery would explain the emergence of Standard Oil filling stations as familiar sights in the city, filling in major street corners south of Broad and highly visible locations downtown.⁹ The city continued to produce goods for which they had been known historically like lumber, cotton and iron. There was even a creosote plant built on what is presently named Ansonborough Fields, at the east end of Calhoun Street. Additionally, Stoney confirms Charleston's abundance of raw materials and continuing agricultural strengths. As a locale, the city was said to be best served by its rail and water routes as well as "native-born" labor. Stoney noted, perhaps a bit too optimistically, that the city's conditions were favorable enough to attract companies of the north and east to take advantage of productive workers, good transportation and beautiful weather.



1.2 Neighborhoods like Wagener Terrace, north of Hampton Park, accommodated the increasing population whose automobiles required the construction of downtown filling stations.

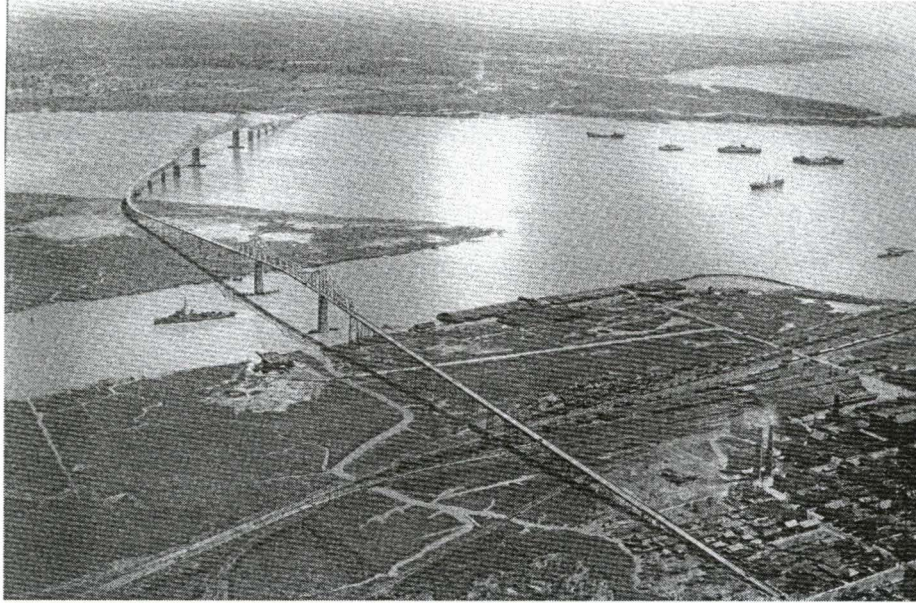
⁹ "Five Local Buildings to Make Way for Gasoline Stations in Charleston Soon" News and Courier, (Charleston) 20 January 1936. The included photographs illustrate the takeover of the gas pump even into residential areas such as the Charlestowne and Harleston Village neighborhoods.

Always looking to attract tourists from other areas of the state and nation, the mayor makes his case that the community was “preparing itself as a first class resort for discriminating tourists.” With an eye to history and architecture, Stoney names the historic landmarks and “garden estates” as reasons to the city’s annual inundation of tourists from in and out of state. And visitors returned thanks to the relatively recently introduced “modern conveniences and comforts” like hotels, beach resorts golf courses and water sports.

The city had become increasingly accessible due to the growing number of highways and bridges in the area. New bridges were built over the Ashley and Cooper Rivers for a combined cost of nearly six million dollars. First, the Memorial Bridge was constructed over the Ashley in 1926 with the Great Cooper River (formally John P. Grace Memorial Bridge) to follow in 1929.¹⁰ Accessibility was no longer limited to automotive traffic when for the first time, Mayor Stoney’s goal of bringing general aviation to Charleston was realized in 1930 with the completion of a new municipal airport.¹¹

¹⁰ Annan, Jason and Pamela Gabriel. The Great Cooper River Bridge, The University of South Carolina Press, Columbia: 2002.

¹¹ See the Charleston City Year Book of 1930 for associated costs and additional information.



1.3 The Grace Bridge shortly after completion in 1929.

The landmark year 1931 also introduced on the books a zoning and city planning commission for building regulation.¹² More than the focused interest of disparate women's organizations, historic preservation was becoming a key element in the community. Subsequent years would see greater focus to the goal of zoning and architectural parameters as well as additional city beautification projects. Demands for cleaner neighborhoods resulted in a city ultimatum in the mid-thirties for owners to "fix up, or tear down."¹³ This applied mainly to the numerous derelict structures bordered by Queen, Beaufain, Archdale and Smith Streets. Nearly a decade later, Albert Simons' Mills Manor Housing Project was a product of the city's agenda, and the year after that,

¹² The 1932-1935 Year Book gives parameters for the new Board of Zoning Administration and the first Board of Architectural Review in the city.

¹³ "City Condemns 300 Houses; Total is Due to Pass 1500," News and Courier, 30 June 1935.

the same architect's design, the Memminger, appeared on the fringe of this newly improved neighborhood.¹⁴



1.4 The new Mills Manor homes, as seen from piazza of Marine Hospital, 20 Franklin Street.

Outside the peninsula, the face of the landscape was being changed by developing suburbs for an increasingly mobile population. But the urban center still drew the crowds to work, shop and be entertained. The desire for modern conveniences manifested itself in the filling stations that appeared at numerous street corners. Once occupied by a house, store or business, the sites on which these structures were built contributed to Charlestonians' memories of how their city once looked and what progress might mean to the future of the familiar. The additions of the uniquely modern Riviera Theater and Memminger Auditorium further added to the changing vision of the city's urban center.

The look of modern architecture was not completely foreign to Charlestonians. Although modest new homes in Wagener Terrace were more colonial revival than Le

¹⁴ Thousands of African-Americans who lived in this area were displaced to a new "cheaper" housing project in Ansonborough that resulted from the demolition of the then obsolete creosote plant. The Mills development was reserved for whites only. See the City Year Book of 1939.

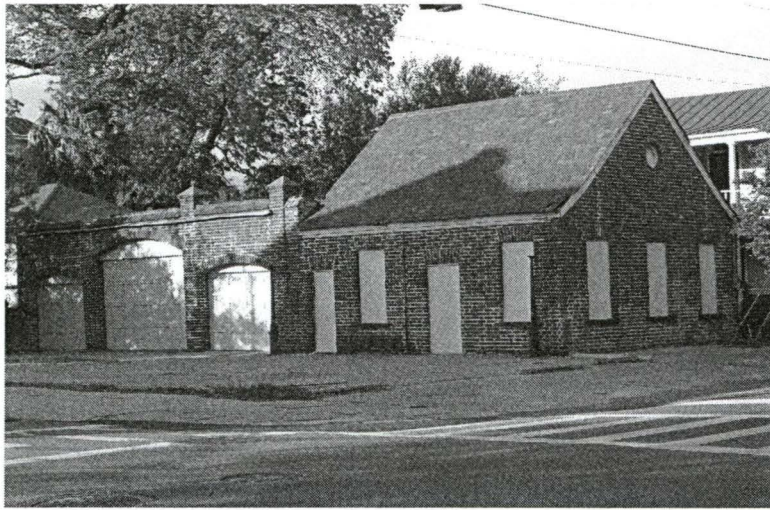
Corbusier, the streamlined appearance of high moderne appeared on more than one downtown street. In the late spring of 1938, perhaps fueled by the anticipation of equally progressive designs downtown and the retiring of the electric streetcars that had serviced downtown since 1897, a new Union Bus Terminal was proposed between Society and Wentworth Streets.¹⁵ The presentation by Architect George Brown of Charleston, West Virginia won the contract for the new building. Described as modern, the terminal was “faced with blue vitrolu and ivory vitrolite, trimmed in chromium and aluminum, with inserts of glass brick.”¹⁶ Patrons strolled over terrazzo floors on their way to waiting rooms and covered loading platforms or dined in the full service restaurant prior to their respective trips. Sadly, this building that stood the test of time was eliminated by the reality of progress. The bus terminal at 89 Society Street was demolished in the mid-1990s to make way for a contemporary hotel. It is ironic that hotels such as this and Charleston Place caused the destruction of historic structures for which their guests come to the city to admire.

The majority of buildings in the city designed to respond to contemporary demands did not often reflect the prevailing “modern style.” Subsequent to the landmark zoning decision in 1931, a few traditional looking gas stations were built in the picturesque neighborhoods away from the main circulation routes within the city. One gas station in particular, located on the northeast corner of Wentworth and Ashley, was written up in the News and Courier which touted “ancient bricks caressed by the hand of

¹⁵ “New Bus Station Planned for City,” News and Courier, 8 March 1938.

¹⁶ “Bus Station Job to be Given Soon.” News and Courier, 16 April 1938.

time” as the composition of this colonial revival example.¹⁷ The gasoline pumps themselves were “placed on a concrete courtyard in front of the quaint house.” Although no longer in service, the building still remains as a unique response to an ordinary issue.



1.5 Historic filling station, Wentworth and Ashley.

Albert Simons himself made important observations regarding the role of the art and architecture in downtown Charleston: “It might be claimed (that).....it was only after World War I that we became conscious of our American cultural heritage.”¹⁸ Post World War I, Simons argues that Charleston was rediscovered, not only by the economically appreciated tourist, but increasing numbers of “writers, architects and artists to wander through the streets and experience the amazing beauty of great gardens.”¹⁹ He indicates

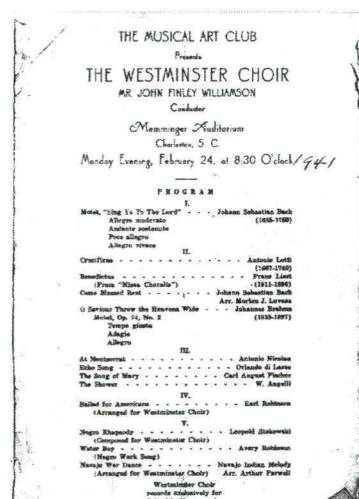
¹⁷ “Old Charleston is Model for New Gasoline Station.” News and Courier, date unknown.

¹⁸ Simons, Albert. “40 Years of Preservation.” AIA Journal, December 1960:27-29.

¹⁹ Ibid

the success of the preservation movement in the twenties, with the founding of the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings in 1920.²⁰

In this article on preservation history in Charleston, Simons notes that with the increasing number of artists within the city, the visitor or resident alike was exposed to art at every level. They were able to appreciate the varying styles, words and colors that Charleston had to offer during its so-called "Renaissance." In the latter decade of the Renaissance, the 1940s, the Memminger Auditorium was used not only for school functions but for the city's Symphony Orchestra and other traveling choral and orchestral performances. Its excellent acoustics made the auditorium a popular place for concerts; before the 1968 completion of the Galliard Municipal Auditorium, an urban renewal project in its own right, it was the only place to see shows of that caliber.²¹



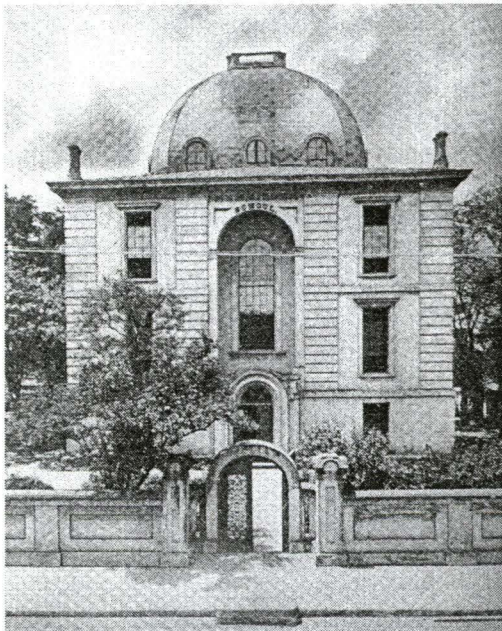
1.6 A Program from one of the many performances held in the 1940s at the Memminger.

²⁰ See Stephanie Yuhl's A Golden Haze of Memory: the Making of Historic Charleston, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2000 for the role heritage tourism played in Charleston from 1920-1940.

²¹ Poston, Jonathan. The Buildings of Charleston, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia: 1997. p.427

THE MEMMINGER NORMAL SCHOOL

Prior to a discussion of the Memminger Auditorium's arrival Beaufain Street, the first layer of the site's history as it was associated with the name Memminger must be addressed. Beginning with the school's construction in 1858, The Memminger Normal School was an all female institution constructed by local architects Edward Jones and Francis D. Lee in the Italianate style. Composed of 57 girls in grades nine through eleven for its first year of operation, it was the only school of its kind in the city at a time when urban schools were entering a time of noticeable development. A demand for trained teachers increased proportionally, making the establishment of a school like the Memminger a necessity.²²



2.1 The St. Phillip Street elevation of the Memminger School.

²² Taylor, Mary. The Memminger Normal School: 1858-1932, Walker, Evans and Cogswell Co. Charleston: 1941.

In January of 1858, the site for the new school was agreed upon and sold for \$8000. The land was part of the Glebe land of St. Michael's and of the two existing buildings on the premises, one was demolished. The remaining structure, a brick kitchen of Gothic revival style, was used as a janitor's "lodge." No plans exist for the over \$16,000 proposal for the school building. The main building was sited at the center of a picturesque campus that included structures of other styles; besides the Gothic "lodge" there was a separate building for home economics, designed in the Queen Anne style. On the second and third floors of the main structure, there was a central hall with four corner classrooms. The design was influenced by the Lancastrian or monitorial system of floor plan. The plan followed that of the school on St. Phillip Street known as the Bennett School.²³

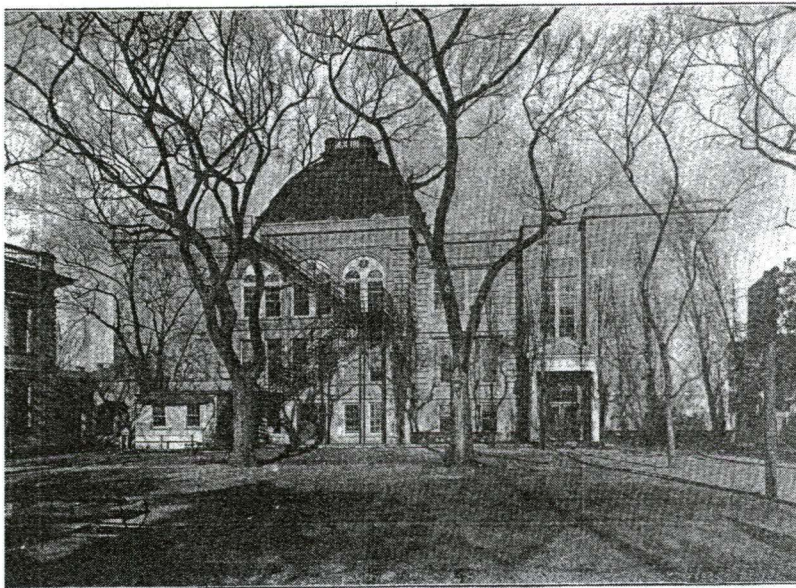
At the time of its construction, there were only about one hundred public high schools in the United States. "As late as 1854, the Board of Commissioners for the Charleston region in their reports to the legislature referred to free schools as schools for the poor. The overcoming of this idea was one of the difficulties facing the new board appointed in 1854, of which Mr. Christopher Gustavus Memminger became chairman in 1855."²⁴ The school could have been the first public high school in the state of South Carolina. In any event, it was one of the first of its kind. Its legacy continues with the auditorium: an innovative space for performance just as the Memminger Normal School was an innovative space for education.

²³ Taylor, 5.

²⁴ Taylor, 10.

Not even open for a decade when the Civil War began, the school, as well as all schools in the city, was closed between February 17th, 1865 and January 1st, 1867. The Memminger was also not in session for the year 1862-63 due to low enrollment, on account of so many children being taken from the city. The students were moved to a new location the following year, prior to federal occupation in the winter of 1865.²⁵

After nearly twenty years of running successfully, the school was plagued by economic problems following damage of the 1886 earthquake and subsequent Panic of 1893. It was able to emerge from crisis and the summer of 1901 saw alterations and additions to what had become a rather crowded school. Work continued over the next two years and included such improvements as a chandelier and additional wiring of the assembly hall, and the construction of an eight foot high brick wall enclosing the campus on all sides.



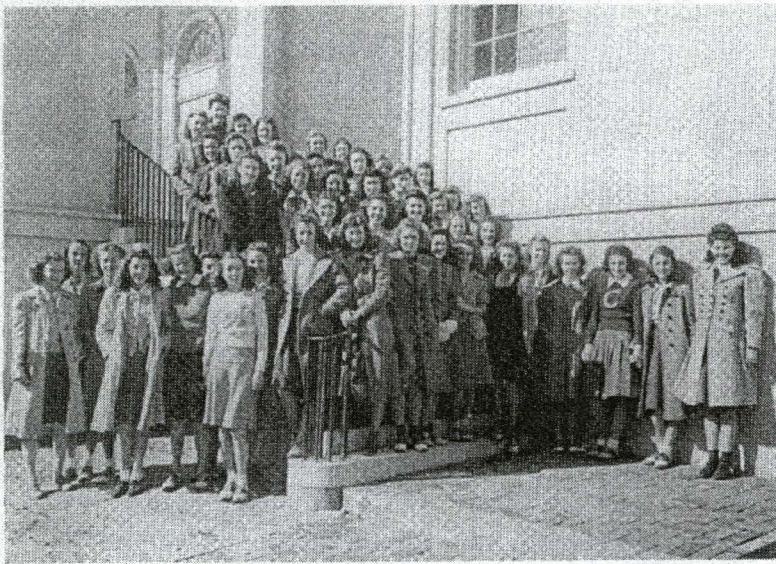
2.2 The school after additions. Photo c. 1935.

²⁵ Taylor, 12.

Women continued to be educated at the Memminger, with such noticeable Charleston names as Henrietta Aiken Kelley, who was in the group of the first women to attend the school. Mr. Memminger himself served as chair of the school board from 1855-70, 1872-78 and 1880-85. His death on March 7th, 1888 was relatively early in the institution's life. From its first year at a scant 57, enrollment in 1932 was 1000, and that number continued to grow until the Memminger finally closed after the 1949-1950 school year.²⁶

Thirty-four

THE OWLET



STUDENT COUNCIL

| | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| President | Neil Perry |
| Vice President | Ella Lockwood |
| Secretary | Harriet Dehrmann |
| Treasurer | Polly Welch |

2.3 Students on the steps of the Memminger, 1939.

²⁶ Taylor, 20.

The history of the school with its new auditorium begins in 1935, when Charleston businessmen sought a location for a municipal auditorium. Aided significantly by the various federal relief organizations of the Roosevelt era, the city administration had at their disposal nearly five million dollars with which to bring the project to fruition.²⁷ At first, the county's Federal Emergency Relief Act administrator suggested Wragg Mall as an appropriate location. The idea was for the project to be built "in the central section of the city of Charleston in order that conventions and other public bodies will have a suitable meeting place."²⁸ Approval of the site was not granted and the auditorium undertaking was put on hold.

In 1938, the Williamson Mill on Upper King Street was to be demolished in order to accommodate a new middle school to be designed by Albert Simons and Samuel Lapham. County officials suggested an adaptive use project: a new auditorium could occupy the historic mill space, to offer not only production space but provide a gymnasium and community center as well.²⁹ This proposal, too, was rejected on the basis of location.

The main impetus for securing a new auditorium in a central location was attracting speakers, conventions and "extraordinary cultural events" to Charleston.³⁰ Edwin Poulnot, chairman of the Charleston Retail Merchants association auditorium

²⁷ "City May Seek WPA Auditorium," News and Courier, 2 July 1935.

²⁸ "City Auditorium Planned as Local PWA Project," News and Courier, 16 July 1935.

²⁹ "Auditorium Plans Now Being Drawn," News and Courier, 17 May 1938.

³⁰ "Merchants Seek Convention Hall," News and Courier, 1 June 1938.

committee cited substantial economic benefits as reason to construct “a hall accessible to the business district and to the hotels” with “no issue being so vital to the future welfare and growth of Charleston.”³¹ Whereas the old Williamson Mill building may not have “fit the bill” for a large scale, modern, municipal auditorium, the proposal later that summer for the Memminger Auditorium did.

For just over a decade, the historic school and the modern auditorium coexisted. The modern and traditional existing simultaneously represents Charleston’s effort then, and now, to promote diversity in design for the health of the city. Architectural products of high quality and good intent remain; the previous example of the traditionally designed gas station is a small but significant reminder of that fact. In their execution, Simons’ designs appeared to reflect an acceptance of progress while embodying traditional design characteristics that had been responsible for bringing the best classical buildings to fruition. Inspired by American architect Robert Mills, the design of the Memminger personifies the value of historic preservation and maintenance of the city’s appearance as reflective of and responsive to the past.

The same techniques applied to the Memminger Auditorium can be seen in the treatment of some of Mills’ most significant buildings. His primary role as an architect in South Carolina was to place throughout the state buildings that would nurture a patriotic connection by promoting general welfare.³² Two themes that Mills kept in mind when designing his public works were patriotism and sense of place. He once wrote that those

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bryan, John M, editor. Robert Mills, Architect, AIA Press, Washington, D.C: 1989.

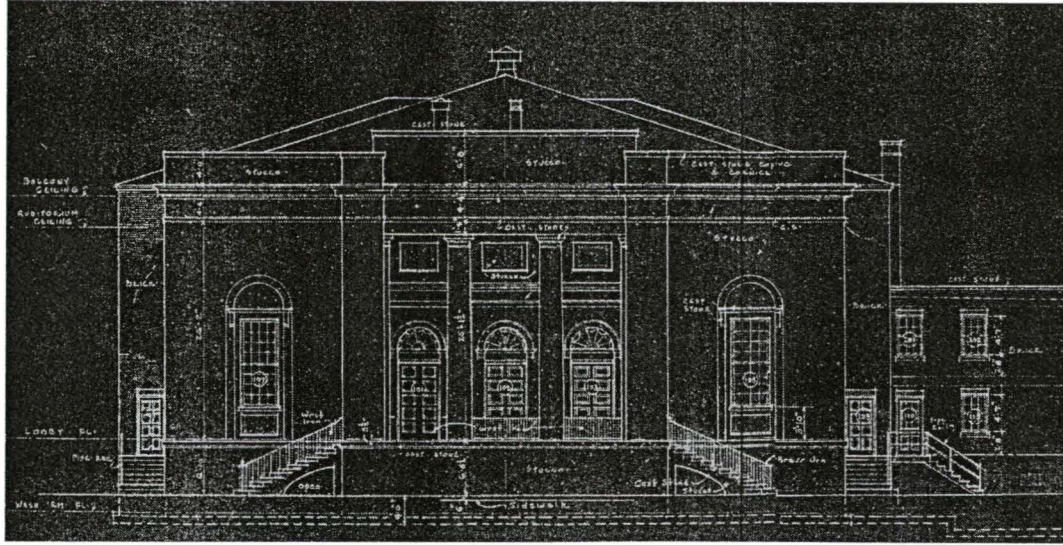
emotions were “planted in the human breast for wise purposes.”³³ If the idea of civic pride is substituted for patriotism, that along with *genius loci* were feelings that Simons may have hoped to inspire through the Memminger, the city’s first municipal auditorium.



2.4 First Baptist Church, 61-63 Church Street.

The feeling of Simons’ Memminger Auditorium brings to mind the hovering porticos and monumental columns of Mills’ courthouses and churches, further suggesting a play on use of space: the courthouse being a stage for justice and the theater being a stage for living work. Additionally, the courthouses were without applied ornament, a characteristic that Simons obviously copies in the design of the Memminger. It is minimal—a paired down classicism in response to the streamlined, but technologically advanced moderne or deco of the time.

³³ Ibid.



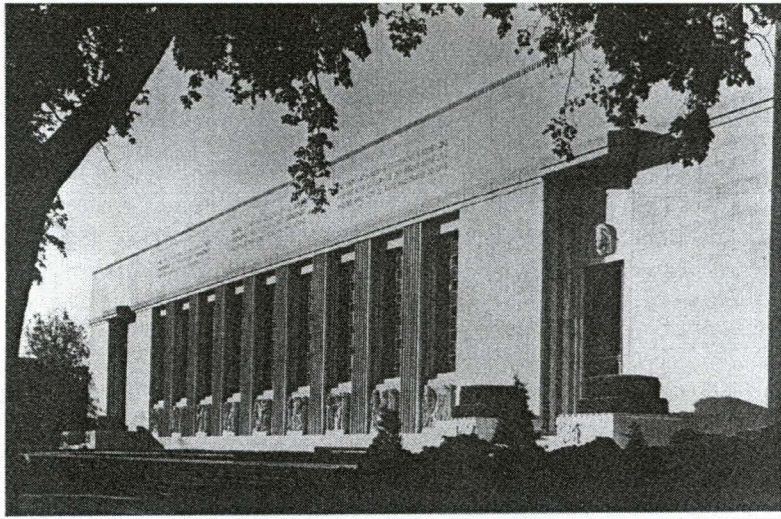
2.5 Simons' original Beaufain Street elevation.

Albert Simons was only one architect whose product reflected experimentation in combining accepted classical language with tenets of modern design. At Penn, Simons studied under a Beaux Arts trained French architect whose innovative style may have influenced his later work. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Paul Cret designed civic architecture such as art museums and courthouses which challenged the conventional classical language with which he had been trained. Cret was given a commission in 1928 to design The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. which required him to "reconcile the client's quite predictable preference for Tudor architecture with the prevailing classical decorum of the Washington Mall."³⁴

This particular project is significant to a study of the Memminger in that besides developing a classic modern, Cret also created disengagement between the interior and

³⁴ Grossman, Elizabeth. The Civic Architecture of Paul Cret, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1996. p.165.

the exterior of the building. Although there was no such disconnect when the Memminger was built, the success in Cret's solution and his usage of time-specific stylistic language reflect the way Albert Simons may have responded to modern predilections. Furthermore, the resulting interior/exterior dialog Cret created can be compared to the current condition of the Memminger Auditorium.



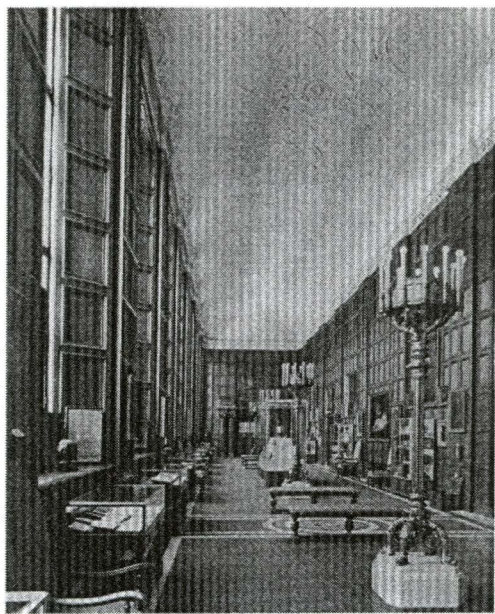
2.6 Folger Shakespeare Library, East Capitol Street elevation.

The Folger Shakespeare Library integrated an Elizabethan and early English Renaissance interior with a “new classical” exterior almost more reminiscent of the Riviera Theater than the Memminger Auditorium. The program and detailing support this complex response; the building remains visually accessible to the public while moderne sculpture and grillework identify the importance of the items contained therein.³⁵

In the initial scheme, the rhythms of Cret's overt classicism could only succeed if an observer were to experience the building head on. However, according to the client, it

³⁵ Grossman, 165.

was the end of the structure-the direction from which most people would come-that required emphasis. After careful consideration of Greek precedents, Cret's solution was to not feature either façade, but allow the library to read as a single volume, establishing it as an "exquisite container."³⁶



2.7 Exhibition Hall, Folger Shakespeare Library.

The design solution of the Memminger also makes it possible for the building to be read as a type of container. Treatment of the elevated portico/mass relationship suggests an element of relief, like the fenestration and entrances to the Folger. Since the portico is partially sunken into the composition rather than being an extension of the structure, the resulting space can be seen as carved out; it is a room that is in some sense equally inside and outside. Tripartite massing of the Beaufain Street elevation balances

³⁶ Grossman, 174.

the whole, with the continuous entablature unifying the building. Ultimately, the proportion and massing conveys the Memminger's function as a vehicle for performance.

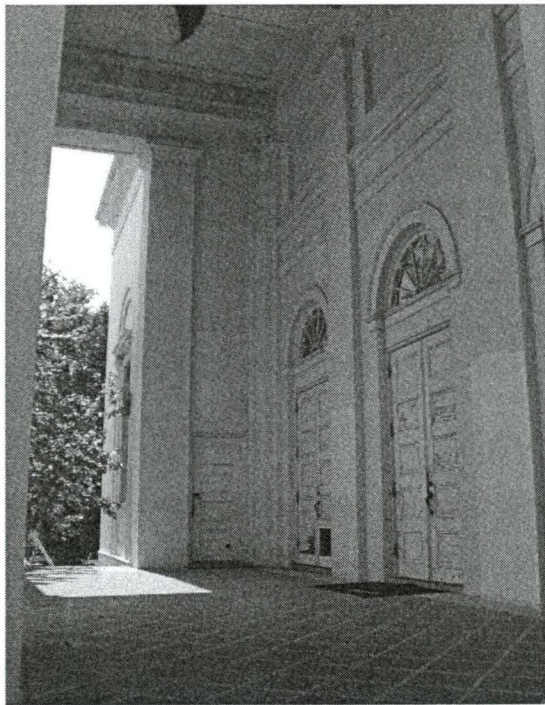


2.8 Beaufain Street elevation of Memminger Auditorium.

With an interior gallery that serves the same purpose as the Memminger's lobby, Cret softened the contrast from modern exterior to very traditional interior. He interpreted the details of the Folger's Elizabethan rooms and applied them within this "promenade." It was a way to suggest the various destinations from the gallery, while not turning immediately from linear eaves to heavily carved roof trusses. In contrast, eliminating the subtle procession from the modern to the classic, the Memminger offers the element of surprise. A patron enters the symmetrical façade through one of three sets of double doors on axis with the space between the two oversized *in antis* columns. The lobby retains its original classic treatment, but detachment occurs upon passing through yet another of three sets of doors to the auditorium itself. Once a typical theater "box" with

wooden seats, engaged fluted pilasters, balcony seating and proscenium stage, the interior now is shaped by the shows staged there. Stripped of its finishes down to the brick and outfitted with different seats, the auditorium appears as a reinvented space.

The uses of the Memminger continue a theme of duality; its primary use for athletics and school functions and performances is somewhat incongruous with the formal, classical language it conveys. Only secondarily did the auditorium host elegant evening orchestra concerts and famous operas Charlestonians attended. The scale and lack of heavy classical detail makes the more casual use of the space possible. Its proximity to the street is engaging to passers-by; the elevated front portico acts as an exterior lobby that encourages activity.



2.9 Entrance portico of the auditorium.

Outside, the Memminger's incongruity is further emphasized by the styles of the surrounding buildings. Once containing modest two- and three-story typical Charleston residences built in the 19th century, the immediate area is presently dominated by 20th century buildings. Although no street elevations remain as a visual reminder of the contemporary urban fabric, the 1939 site plan drawing shows three Charleston single houses existed between it and the 1858 Jones and Lee building to the east, as well as typical Charleston two and a half story dwellings across Beaufain.

The demolition of only one significant building was required for its construction: a 3-and-a-half story brick residence at what was then number 50 Beaufain. At present, one finds The Canterbury House in the place of the historic residences. The building does not so much emerge architecturally as proportionally; its twelve stories looms over Mills Manor, Memminger and the few remaining 19th century structures. A parking lot diagonally adjacent does nothing to complement the auditorium's design. Clearly, the complex dialog between the Memminger and its surroundings, once a result of very different factors, occurs even today.

JOSPEH CORNELL AND SURREALISM

Surrealist thinker Andre Breton included in his 1924 Manifesto thoughts of French author Pierre Reverdy, who penned the following in his 1918 book Nord-Sud: “The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the great its emotional power and poetic reality.”

From early collages to later three-dimensional compositions, Joseph Cornell relied on the associative strengths of the objects he chose to include in his art. Although Cornell’s work can not be said to be a product of a particular movement, when put in the surrealist frame of reference certain parallels can be drawn. Like the surrealists, he loved Romantic literature and 19th century French poetry, and “a belief in the primary demands of the imagination.”³⁷ Also, the surrealist’s emphasis on process was a way for the creator to be revealed through his art, the way Cornell’s collages reflected his mentality.³⁸

Cornell amassed a great collection of objects, with which he developed “box-constructions.” When viewed in its own context, each box becomes an individual frame of memory; the objects contained within it are dependent on the viewer to identify outside of an expected use or application. This idea can be applied to stage performances as well; we can be convinced through the characters or context of the play to apply

³⁷ McShine, Kynaston, ed. Joseph Cornell, The Museum of Modern Art, New York: 1990. p.9

³⁸ Blair, Lindsay. Joseph Cornell’s Vision of Spiritual Order, Reaktion Books, London: 1998. p.18

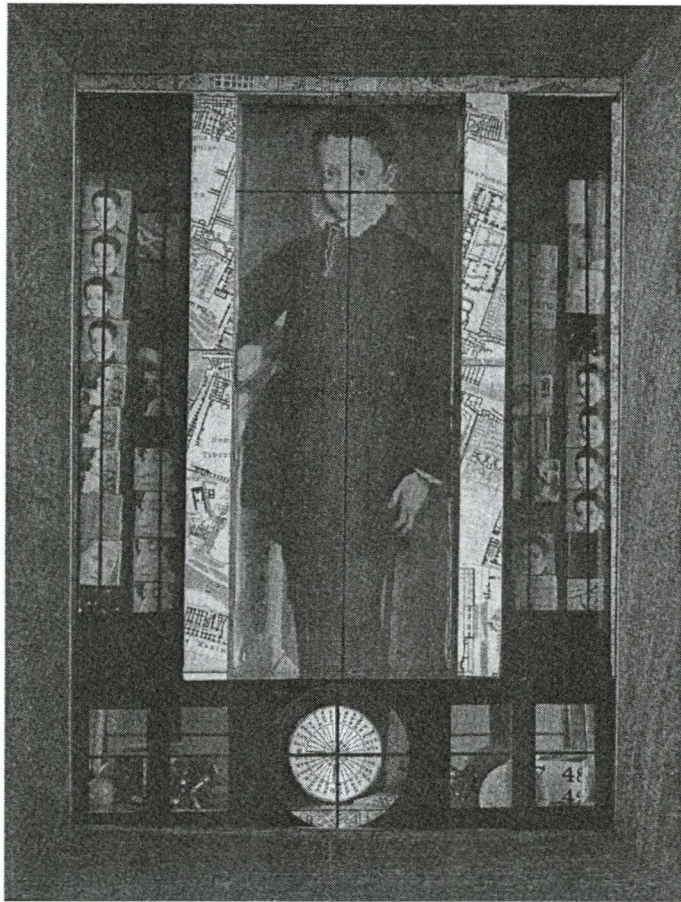
different emotions to objects than what we would normally feel. For example, in the play *The Glass Menagerie*, animal figurines (just objects to us) carry much deeper meaning to Emily. By engaging in what we see, we are drawn into her world. Thus is the magic of both the theatrical realm and the scaled down example of the Cornell boxes.

Some of Cornell's early constructs including images of birds express the "contrast between the natural and artificial."³⁹ Elaborating on this, we find many such contrasts in the realm of the theatrical: character/audience, (the created and real) set/stage, (the dynamic and static) theater/script (interpreted) play to name a few. In order to establish depth in his boxes, Cornell incorporated a variety of perspective elements, resulting in "the feeling of entering a well-composed world."⁴⁰ While literal dimension is achieved in his boxes through glass and mirrors, figurative dimension is suggested as well. In one box, the portrait of a Medici prince is contained behind glass. The composition raises the question: are we the observer or the observed?⁴¹

³⁹ Hartigan, Lynda Roscoe et al. *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday*. Thames and Hudson, New York: 2003.

⁴⁰ Hartigan, 27.

⁴¹ McShine, 11.



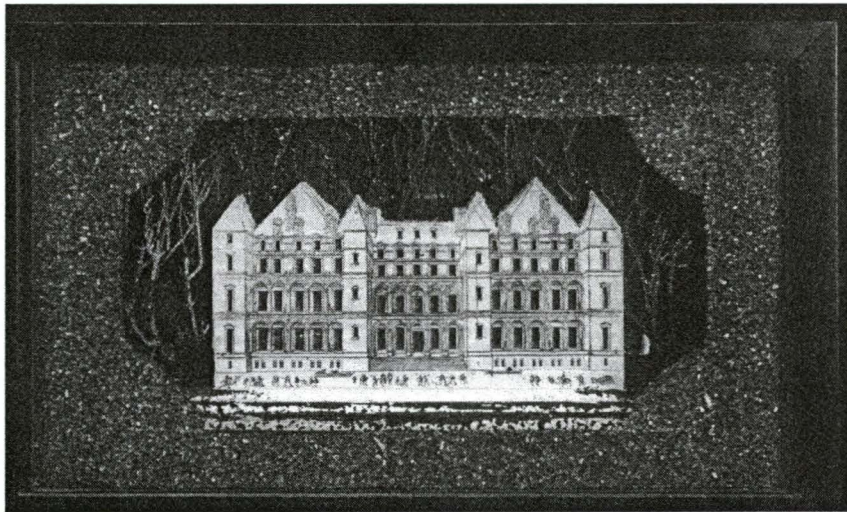
3.1 "Medici Slot Machine," 1942.

A term associated with Cornell's boxes is "surrealist toy."⁴² The artist himself entered in his diary an explanation of his objects as "perhaps a definition of the box could be as a kind of 'forgotten game' a philosophical toy of the Victorian era, with poetic or magical 'moving parts'that golden age of the toy alone should justify the box's existence."⁴³ The idea of toy can be applied in this context to mean stage entertainment. Unlike Cornell's boxes which illicit a response particular to the viewer, the action on the

⁴² Hartigan, 32.

⁴³ Cornell Papers, AAA, reel 1060, Mar. 1960 as quoted in above publication.

stage has both its own meaning and applied meaning from the audience. Additionally, Cornell's love for attending ballets and plays in New York in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s was captured in a series of boxes he created at the time, depicting castles. Instead of walking away from a performance with only a memory, the artist miniaturized what he saw on stage. He became the audience to a recreation of the event; giving a "longer life to the notion of performer or character"⁴⁴



3.2 Untitled ("Pink Palace"), 1946.

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan writes of the artist's philosophy, "The road from sensation to representation is what Cornell called 'the exploring that became creative.'"⁴⁵ Through his box creations, Cornell balanced the 'more is more' phenomenon with

⁴⁴ Hartigan. Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday. CD-ROM. Washington, D.C: The Voyager Foundation, Inc, 2003.

⁴⁵ Hartigan, 41.

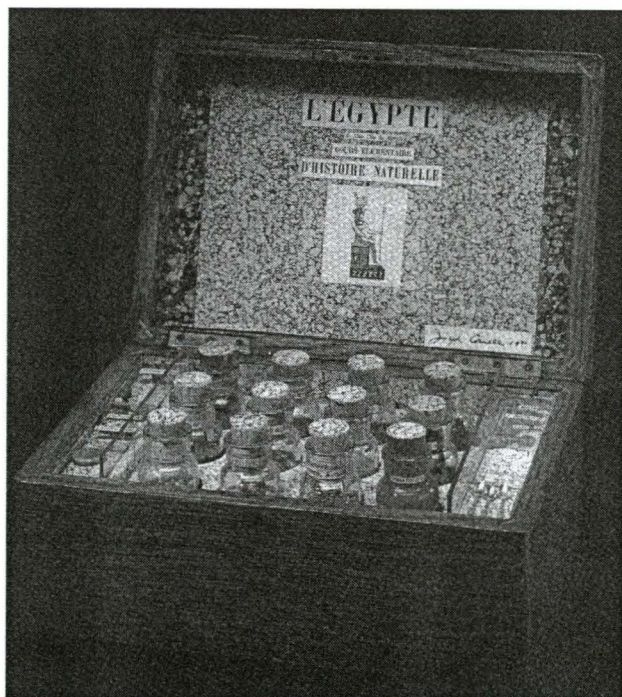
extreme selectivity given the space constraints. One of his favorite words was “apotheosis,” which was representative of his art. He embraced duality and his works express that idea within their composition—“night and day, past and present, old and new, interior and exterior.”⁴⁶ Everything he collected throughout his life was associated with a certain memory or experience. Ironically, his first box constructs were displayed at about the same time the modernist mantra of ‘less is more’ emerged in Europe. Decorative arts, industrial design and architecture of the time was streamlined while Cornell’s work was rather Victorian in nature.

Cornell’s boxes provide a strong sensory experience; he carefully composed each construct to respond to memories, operas, ballets and other performances. The boxes are in a way a microcosm of his memory as the stage is a fraction of a larger place. As the audience is seated within the confines of their ‘containers,’ or chairs, they become objects within the box; they are watching, being watched, recording, and (sometimes) being recorded. Another aspect of compartments is revealed in Cornell’s “L’Egypte” box of 1940. Here, it is the sense of timelessness. Cornell calls the bottles contained within the box, which in turn hold various treasures, “museums.”⁴⁷ He ultimately fixes the objects in time, holding them for the future. This box in particular represents Cornell’s most notable interests in the late 1930s and early 1940s: theater, the eternal and Egyptian art.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Hartigan, 15.

⁴⁷ Waldman, Diane. Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday. CD-ROM. Washington, D.C: The Voyager Foundation, Inc, 2003.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



3.3 "L'Egypte," 1940.

The Memminger shell is the built encasement for the theatrics it supports inside, theatrics which go on not only on stage but off as well. The success in each box is in its staging, materials used and juxtapositions. Only a well-staged performance creates the desired effect in the audience; whether real or minimal, for a set to be successful in its goal to engage the audience, it must tap into its collective memory and experience. *That the Memminger both engages an oft-forgotten history of Charleston and provides a disconnect between both the past and present, modern and contemporary is crucial.* The interior is really a place of nowhere, or anywhere. Walking through the doors, one loses himself in the experience, which is also the feeling that Cornell's boxes create. They are neither of his time nor ours, but exist in that disconnect that theater creates: a realm of imagination that draws one in as he absorbs it. "His perception of the past as a form of history that informs the present and shapes the future considers time as a continuum and

creative force.”⁴⁹ Hartigan adds, “Ultimately Cornell recognized that time can create an oasis in which to experience beauty and insight.”

Cornell’s boxes were all about the process and theater is much the same way. It is not about the last scene, but the preparation, the anticipation and the observation.

“Creating perfectly mitered or dovetailed joints was not the goal. Producing a convincing, holistic design was, and that meant paying attention to execution, detailing and finish.”⁵⁰

The way he thought was not academic but poetic, easily exploring the abstract character that the element of poetry introduced. “Cornell was at ease with abstraction, expressing and synthesizing qualities apart from the materials he used.”⁵¹ And what is theater if not the abstract and poetic? Creating a mood from any number of two and three dimensional sets, props and costumes meant defining a limited realm of reality through an infinite realm of imagination and creativity.

Cornell suggested that found objects, ordinary and forgotten, exist ephemerally until an artist intervenes to give them meaning.⁵² He believed literal things could create an elaborate and subtle form of magic. The idea is that one can take cast-offs and make them something else entirely. Such has become the way the Memminger is defined. No longer a place for school plays or orchestral concerts, the sets of various performances that have called it home have established its interior as a magical set that evolves from

⁴⁹ Hartigan, 23.

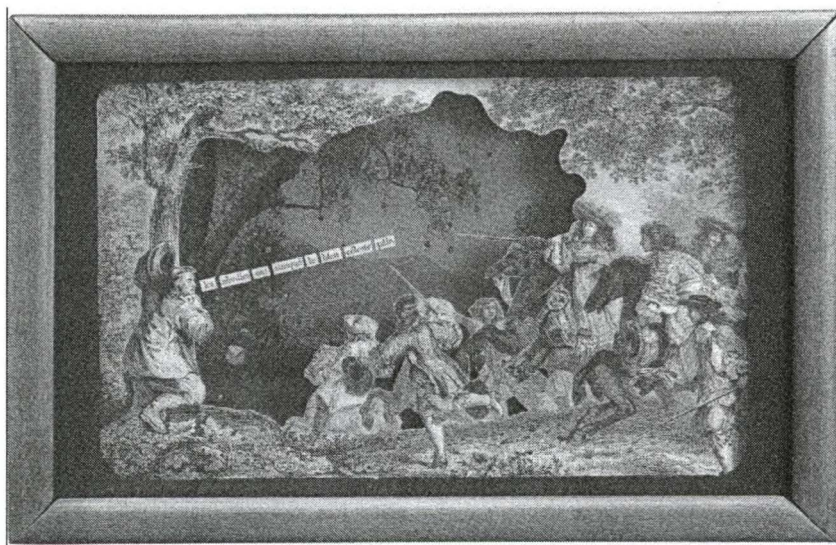
⁵⁰ Hartigan, 22.

⁵¹ Hartigan, 23.

⁵² Hartigan, 23.

year to year. This sense of timelessness can be seen in the elements contained in Cornell's completed pieces. In order to create in his works a "suggestion of times past," the artist would apply his own patina to the objects so that they would appear weathered.⁵³

Other elements that Cornell's works, and the theater, embody are illusionism and perspective. Both are used to create a world that could not exist but for an imagined place(the stage) or a carefully created construct(the boxes.) Scale is another critical factor, with bigger not necessarily being more effective. Cornell read about the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke, who believed that "smallness" was 'the first consideration in defining the nature of the beautiful.'⁵⁴ In his boxes are objects meant to be discovered, like a carefully composed set will include smaller elements that contribute to the whole.



3.4 Object("Les Abeilles"), 1940.

⁵³ McShine, 11.

⁵⁴ Hartigan, 28.

Projected in Cornell's art was both "the specificity of the material world" and "the open-ended character of the immaterial world of ideas and emotions."⁵⁵ In his compositions, these two disparate ideas were realized simultaneously due to his appreciation of both the real and abstract realms. His goal was to transport the viewer to another plane while "delivering a sense of illumination and uplift."⁵⁶

Symbolism is also an important element. Repeating artifacts calls to mind associative memories like childhood, games and the celestial. Newer boxes were variations on themes from older boxes or series; ideas blended among each other while using the same key components. This is the way a set is established for various scenes; key elements may or may not be associated with other parts of a performance. "Repetition provided this artist with a context, even boundaries, for experimentation and exploration."⁵⁷

We can attribute surrealist concepts to the Memminger since it embodies an unfinished quality, unlike the Riviera whose rehabilitation reflects an expressed need at a particular point in time. The boxes of Joseph Cornell could, in a way, be interpreted as incomplete. An element within the construct could always been changed or removed, like a prop on a set. In other Cornell boxes, the element of motion rendered experiencing the work incomplete unless the viewer was able to actively engage the composition.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hartigan, 29.

⁵⁷ McShine, 11.



3.5 Untitled (penny arcade portrait of Lauren Bacall), 1945.

Cornell idolized screen sirens of the 30s and 40s; their intangibility inspired him to compose collages in their honor. Works related to the women of the cinema represent Cornell's emphasis on "commemoration, memory and preservation"⁵⁸ which are the very same forces at work on the Memminger Auditorium. Through its treatment as a work of architecture, and subsequently preservation, Charleston commemorates the Memminger's place in the downtown theater scene of the past and present as well as the talent of its architect, Albert Simons. Any of these three elements fails without the other; commemoration is impossible without taking an active role in memory, and the memory of a place would eventually be lost if preservation never took place.

⁵⁸ Hauptman, Jodi. *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1999.

THE RIVIERA THEATER

Many layers of history occupy the land on which the Riviera Theater now stands. At the northwest corner of Market and King Streets, the Riviera's predecessor, the Academy of Music, itself represented another layer of history. Prior to the Civil War, what was known as the Adger Building contained a dry goods store. When it was constructed in 1838 the Italianate style building housed Kerrison's department store.⁵⁹

In 1865, John Henry Devereaux was commissioned by then owner John Chadwick to convert the western half of the building into a "modern" theater. Architect John Henry Devereaux converted it into a theater after the war and it was officially opened on the first day of December, 1869.⁶⁰ Chadwick's acquisition of the Adger Building and subsequent renovation provided Charleston with a grand and imposing space exclusively for live performances. The stage of the theater was 53 feet wide, 40 feet deep and 51 feet high. The height of the auditorium was 75 feet. It had a capacity of 730 people among the orchestra stalls, circle and balcony.⁶¹ Re-named The Academy of Music, it is now considered one of the earliest examples of "adaptive re-use" in Charleston. It played host to a number of productions and actors over the course of its more than 60 years.

The superior acoustics and elegant detailing could not offset the Academy's shortcomings of small capacity and even smaller returns. The fate of the theater depended

⁵⁹ Stockton, Robert. "Do You Know Your Charleston?" The News and Courier, Charleston; 26 May, 1980.

⁶⁰ "Story of 66-Year-Old Theater, Doomed by Modern Conditions, Covers History of Important Period for Stage," The News and Courier; 12 October 1936.

⁶¹ Lesesne, Thomas P. "Glory of Academy of Music is Gone With Wrecker's Axe" The News and Courier, Charleston; 10 January 1937.

on owner Albert Sottile and his associates to whom the modern Garden(1918), Victory(1920) and Gloria(1921) Theaters also belonged. Sottile, who arrived in Charleston from Italy in the 1890s and helped create Pastime Amusement Company in 1908, purchased the building in 1920.⁶² At the time of Sottile's acquisition of the Academy, the theater's decline was already under way. As The News and Courier wrote prophetically in a 1936 *Do You Know Your Charleston?* "Perhaps finis is about to be written on the story of the great Adger Building and the Academy of Music."⁶³

And so it was. The "great Adger Building" was demolished in 1936 to make way for the Riviera Theater. Even the wreckers were impressed with its two foot thick walls, enormous timbers and "hand-wrought" ornaments.⁶⁴ Thomas Lesesne laments in a 1937 News and Courier article that "all Charleston sighs for what has been and mourns the passing of this building great in its day, a building about which a wealth of memories crowds." He finishes "The Academy of Music, among the country's finest when it was opened, has been outmoded and has succumbed to the march of progress."

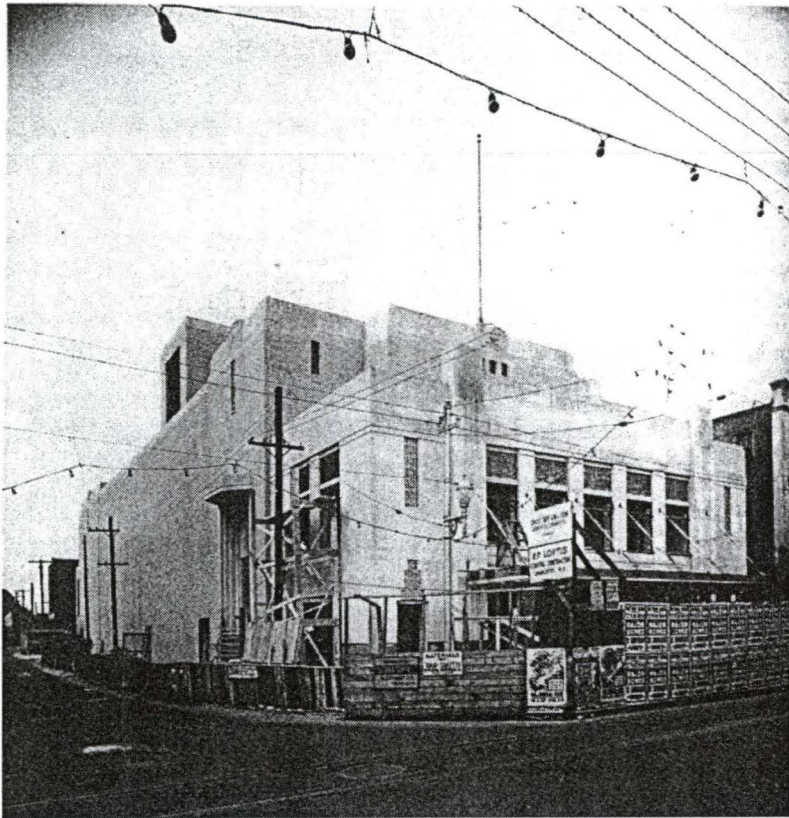
What was built in its place was like nothing Charleston had seen, nor at that scale, would see again. Commonly referred to as Art Deco, given the Riviera's completion date as 1939 it was a late example by that style's standards. Art Deco first appeared in 1925 at the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs in France. It emerged as an exotic response to the strict Beaux Arts principles that defined the look of the first two decades of the new century, in the United States and Europe. Deco was eye candy to the consumer of the

⁶² Stockton, "Do You Know Your Charleston?"

⁶³ "Story of 66-Year-Old Theater..." News and Courier. 12 October 1936.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

ever evolving machine age; “ornament was embraced and elaborated in polychrome stripes and violent contrasts of texture.”⁶⁵ The Riviera expresses the characteristics of the style inside with its bright murals, polychrome plasterwork and geometric details. Outside, a combination of colorful terrazzo interrupting the sidewalk, reflective black vitrolite ticket booth and decorative panels, and obvious verticality.



4.1 The Riviera under construction, December 1938.

Architecturally and civically the Riviera had become a significant element in the streetscape of 1930s King Street. It functioned exactly as it was intended for almost 40

⁶⁵ Curtis, William J.R. Modern Architecture Since 1900. Phaidon Press, London: 1996. p. 290.

years. The theater as Charleston knew it at its inception officially closed in 1977. In an article in the News and Courier from the summer of that year, concern for the future of the city's commercial core was evident. Just ten years before, in 1966, there had been five movie theaters in downtown Charleston. At the time the article was published, the Riviera was the last one that remained.⁶⁶ The Garden was already closed, the College of Charleston had bought the Gloria, the marquee at The Arcade read "for rent" and the American had just announced its closing. Charles Way noted that there just wasn't enough business downtown. The lack of enthusiasm, he hypothesized, was caused by the prior year having been "a bad year for the film industry in general." Way thought that television was the trouble—that people would rather stay in and watch it than go out to see movies.⁶⁷

It was rented by a church for several years, re-opened in 1983 to show classic and foreign language films, but closed again nine months later, this time for good. The theater's owner at the time attributed the failure to "disintegration of the downtown business area."⁶⁸ Inconsistencies in the urban fabric due to needs being met elsewhere contributed to the collapse of Charleston and other cities. A article written after the struggle offers explanations for Charleston's dilemma, but could just as easily be describing any number of cities experiencing the same type of growth. It offers that a

⁶⁶ "Riviera, Downtown's Last Theater, Closing." The News and Courier, 24 August 1977.

⁶⁷ Freeman, Elsa M. "Last of the Downtown Movie Mohicans." The News and Courier, Charleston; 5 March 1977.

⁶⁸ Kovarcik, Bill. "The Riviera Closes Its Doors." The News and Courier, 1 December 1983.

combination of social change and the city's geography made it particularly vulnerable to strip mall-type development caused by the growing post-war automobile culture.⁶⁹

Whether a theater showing art house films or a church, the Riviera remained much as it looked upon completion in 1939, with the exception of period interior finish changes. The amount of work necessary to re-establish the original grandness of the Riviera had precluded any of the owners over time to undertake significant changes to the building. The most major change affected seat configuration. When constructed, the Riviera could seat 1193 people but filling in the orchestra pit in the 1950s allowed for even more seats to be installed and the screen to be widened.⁷⁰



4.2 View of movie screen from balcony.

⁶⁹ Santos, Jerry. "Fade To Black." Charleston Magazine, 3 February 1993. p. 37-39.

⁷⁰ Stockton. "Do You Know Your Charleston?"

Always a single screen theater, the Riviera was never intended as a live performance venue. The space was not conditioned mechanically but there were two methods employed to provide the auditorium with cool air. First, there was an intake fan in the penthouse that circulated air through wooden ducts and into the auditorium space. Additionally, a system of catacombs pulled air from underground to chill the theater. The infrastructure of the building was solid; concrete construction over old B-sized steel beams held up over the years of neglect. Inside, the ceiling hung from a steel grid and a decorated plaster ceiling was applied to metal lath. Colorful art deco murals were painted onto fibrous acoustic board. These interior finishes, however, did not fare as well and deferred maintenance became a major concern.⁷¹



4.3 Riviera screen room before restoration.

⁷¹ Huey, Bill. Personal interview. 3 March 2006.

Sitting vacant for most of the eighties, Charleston's hot summers and frequently high humidity adversely affected the paint and plaster inside the theater. Seeing a prominent location and economic possibility, a proposal was made in October of 1986 to gut the interior of the building and introduce shopping and restaurants. Only the façade would have been spared, as well as the Riviera's original marquee. Sidney Stubbs, Jr. of LS3P was hired by the North Carolina developer to create various potential solutions and the deal was proceeding with the Board of Architectural Review's approval.

At the time, Henry Cauthen was executive director of the Preservation Society. Sensing impending disaster, he penned a letter to Mayor Joe Riley a few weeks later, appealing to his preservation sensibilities. Cauthen illustrated to Riley the importance of saving such a unique building. He gave the example of other art deco theaters around the country being successfully re-used and verified Charleston's success in recent years with the Charleston Place project. Most importantly, Cauthen concludes, "to not make the Riviera a part of all the efforts would be a terrible lack of foresight."⁷² Luckily, the BAR decided in January to deny the proposal and Summit Financial Group pulled out of the project two months later.

Later that year, another design suggestion was made to convert the entire theater into retail space. Luckily, awareness on the part of concerned citizens inspired action and an organization called "Friends of the Riviera" was founded.⁷³ Taking stewardship of the theater to the next level, Charleston resident Raymond Knight purchased the building

⁷² Cauthen, Henry. Letter to Mayor Joe Riley. Charleston, SC. 19 November 1986.

⁷³ "Friends of the Riviera" bulletin from organizational meeting, 10 November 1986. Information available in the SCHS Riviera Theater vertical file.

from Pastime Amusement in December of 1988 for one million dollars.⁷⁴ With no capital to fix the theater, he held on to it. He saw gutting the building as both a great loss for Charleston and a personal loss. Early in Knight's life, the Riviera had been a place to pay a dime and see first-run movies. He hoped that one day someone would purchase it from him and restore it, if not to its original glory, at least so that it could be enjoyed most closely to how it was intended.⁷⁵

Late in 1989, three companies moved into upstairs offices created in the Riviera. These were Building Consultants, Preservation Consultants(headed by John Laurens), and Architectural Alliance, for whom Bill Huey, project architect of the Riviera's restoration, originally worked.⁷⁶ The organizations acted as watchdogs for the building, checking on the auditorium's state and keeping it in use, even if minimal. The theater was in their hands until Raymond Knight decided to sell the Riviera in September of 1990, asking 2.75 million for the theater and adjacent building off of Market Street.⁷⁷ Knight's wish that the Riviera would be restored came true later when in 1991 the city bought it from him for 1.18 million dollars. The asking price for the theater only, without the

⁷⁴ Parker, Jim. "Riviera Theater Put on Market For Sale." The Post and Courier, 17 September 1990.

⁷⁵ Huey, Bill. Personal interview. 3 March 2006.

⁷⁶ Smith, Conley. "Three Firms Move Into Riviera's 2nd Floor Office Space" Post and Courier, 16 November 1989.

⁷⁷ Morgan, Kerri and Elsa McDowell. "Riviera Owner Gets Permit to Gut Landmark" The Post and Courier, 16 July 1991.

Market Street building, was 2.35 million, and the balance was considered a gift from Knight to Charleston.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the conditions inside the Riviera were worsening. The plaster and paint had already begun to show their age and on a particularly disastrous night in March of 1992, an event that could be seen as the turning point in the life of the Riviera occurred.⁷⁹ The theater's unoccupied penthouse, accessible from an old fire escape on the north side of the building, had become home for vagrants seeking shelter. A lit cigarette dropped on an old mattress resulted in a fire that swept through the old wooden ducts and severely damaged the roof. Gallons of water used to put out the fire rushed through holes in the roof and then through the ceiling where the old ductwork had been burnt away. The water took its toll on the murals and plaster work in the auditorium space. Since the lobby was not in the direct path of the fire or doused with water it escaped the worst damage.⁸⁰ Sadly, now aside from being empty and neglected, the building now was scarred by fire.

Preservation was even more urgent. Both Knight and the Friends of the Riviera had wanted to see the theater returned to a movie theater or a performing arts space, but this goal was not feasible. Economics and preservation were reconciled to create a space that responded to downtown's use needs and maintained the Riviera's sense of place. The

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Fire Officials Investigate Riviera Blaze" The Post and Courier, 9 March 1992.

⁸⁰ Huey, Bill. Personal interview. 3 March 2006.

resulting adaptive use project maintained as much original fabric of the Riviera as possible while also recreating what both fire and time had destroyed.⁸¹

The business that provided the opportunity for the Riviera Theater to become what it is today was the Charleston Place Hotel. It bought the Riviera from the city in March of 1996 and embarked on a long and expensive restoration and reconstruction process. From the start, there was an awareness that pure restoration was neither possible nor desirable.⁸² Charleston also no longer had demand for a movie house that seated over 1,000 people, but the hotel did see a benefit in expanding its square footage available for various events especially if that meant saving one of Charleston's greatest 20th century structures. Saving the Riviera re-established the visual impact the unique art deco building had on a very significant street corner.



4.4 The restored façade of the Riviera.

⁸¹ Huey, Bill. Personal interview. 3 March 2006.

⁸² Ibid.

The decisions made in the Riviera project reflect a desire to maintain as much of the character as possible while leaving no doubt that this would be a modernized space architecturally, mechanically and technologically. Given its new life as a convention center and meeting space, the basic layout of the theater could be preserved and enhanced. On the north side of the building, what had been an alley containing a fire stair was enclosed. This created a side hall to access the main meeting space on the second floor, and both support space and egress on the first. Segregation was part of everyday life when the theater was built, and accordingly, it required African American patrons to use a side entrance and sit in the upper portion of the balcony. The side stair that accessed the balcony was removed for an elevator which services all levels of the theater. Instead of a blank concrete wall facing Market Street, the south elevation now features stores in the space created when the sloping floor of the auditorium was leveled. The plan allows these new storefronts to face Market Street while the support spaces were fit in under the newly created hall above.⁸³

⁸³ Huey, Bill. Personal interview. 3 March 2006.



4.5 Balcony access stair removed during renovation.

Work on the interior finishes required a similar point of view relative to the idea of maintaining original character. Given the new configuration of the auditorium, the water damaged murals had to be moved up to compensate for the added street level floor. The murals had been painted directly on the acoustic material applied to the walls, and therefore the only option in maintaining them in the theater was re-creation. Since there were simple, smaller painted “transoms” above the deco murals, no element of the murals’ designs were compromised when they were exactly re-copied further up on the walls.⁸⁴

Although the sense of layers of time and history have been lost in the re-creation of original elements of the Riviera the decision to preserve the theater the way it was was a matter of necessity: social and economic. On one hand, the best of the theater remains,

⁸⁴ Ibid.

or re-creations of its best elements at least, yet in an altered state. One could suggest that the Riviera as it used to be is merely latent, but not gone. The mural designs are the same as what were seen on the walls in 1939. The vitrolite, foyer crown molding, exterior terrazzo and original King Street ticket booth remain intact. The theater is of high architectural significance and a source of pride for a downtown which can claim few structures of this time still standing.



4.6 View to balcony from floor of renovated screen room.

Considering the different uses and designs of the Riviera and Memminger, the Riviera could arguably not have been successful as a performance space given its construction only as a movie theater. Damage wrought by the fire already required the stripping and repair of integral details. If the space had been transformed to accommodate theatrical and concert performances, even more of the Riviera would have been lost to necessary changes. Upgrades required by codes would have further compromised the

theater's original integrity. The architect's solution was well executed adaptive use; given that the original use was obsolete and no needed use would keep the structure as is, a compatible use was established whereby the most original fabric was maintained or seamlessly re-created.

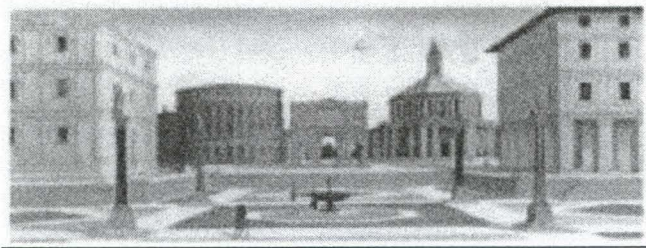


4.7 Original terrazzo floor in front of King Street façade ticket booth.

CASE STUDY: HARDY HOLTZMAN PFEIFFER THEATERS

A contemporary architecture and preservation firm proves the successes of various rehabilitation and adaptive-use methods for theaters. Hardy Collaborative, or H3, is based in New York and founded by Hugh Hardy. A lecture by Mr. Hardy summarized a few of his best known theater related projects of the firm with which he was previously associated, Hardy Holtzman Pfeiffer. He reflected on each venture in terms of how we view where we have come from and where we are going as a society.

Three characteristics were cited as key forces which have caused the modern city to be viewed as threatening, and ultimately, shifted the definition of the word “public.” As for the historic theaters themselves, all aspects that could be restored, were. However, Thomas Wolfe’s statement that “you can’t go home again” reinforced the impossibility of turning the clock back with reference to both preservation and past associations with the idea of all things “public.”



5.1 Ideal City, c. 1500.

Once seen as religious, spiritual and cultural, the public realm was clean and ordered and beautiful. The renaissance painting *Ideal City*, artist unknown, depicts a wide

public space, like St. Mark's square in Venice, surrounded by a variety of differently styled buildings, few people in sight and no transportation. There was no way to represent the ideal *without* a public space.⁸⁵ It was a required urban element where people went to share ideas, news, gossip and also perform business transactions and simply live.

Hardy then went on to say that the more threatening character of the modern city is caused by the evolution of technology, shift in the social contract and changes in modes of transportation. Somehow, the word "public" suggests inferiority, in schools, housing and transportation among other of life's necessities. The wholesale importation of entertainment was said to be the root of the problem. The value that society puts on that which is meant for the greater population has been lessened; subsequently, the best quality is meant for only those who can afford it, or the smallest percentage of our society. The adjective "public" now implies "cheap."



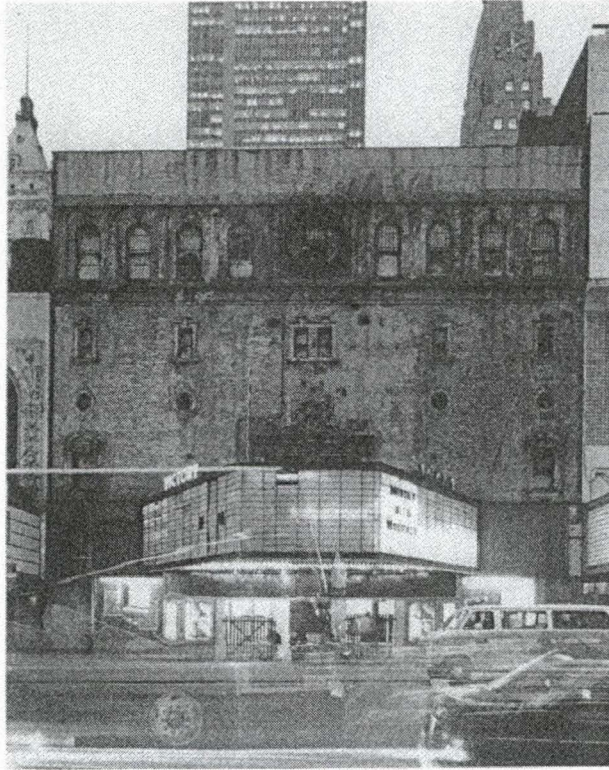
5.2 Demolition of housing projects in St. Louis.

⁸⁵ Hardy, Hugh. "The End of History." CAC/CDC Lecture Series. Charleston Visitor's Center, Charleston, S.C. 30 January 2006.

What does the “public” aspect of the city have to do with theaters? Here enters the idea of authenticity. In order to be entertained today, we require something that keeps our attention. No more is what Mr. Hardy calls “singular interaction” sufficient in enjoying cultural or artistic merit in some form of entertainment. However, the preservation approaches H3 uses reconcile the ideas of authenticity and “public spaces” with the altered identity of entertainment. The theaters are meant to be appreciated and used by everyone.

Given changes in technology, codes and use, each solution demonstrates awareness that the life of a historic building is not possible to project through literal restoration.⁸⁶ The past is not re-created but each place is rediscovered with respect to the building’s history and present, as well as the reality of the proposed use of the space. Therefore, each Hardy case study successfully combines the idea of authenticity while also expressing layers of history.

⁸⁶ Waters, Debra, et.al. HHPA: Hardy Holtzman Pfeiffer Associates, Rizzoli International Publications, New York: 1999. p. 14



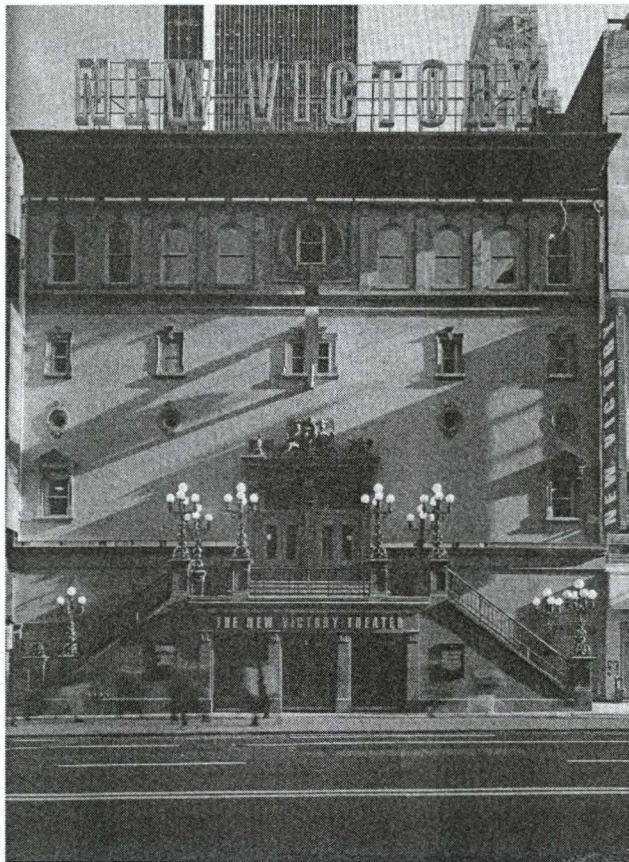
5.3 The Victory Theater before restoration.

The historical significance of Manhattan's Victory theatre is its status, when completed in 1900, as the first theater on the block between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Its appearance evolved with changes made by different owners, which necessitated an interpretive rather than restorative approach.⁸⁷ On the exterior, a new double stair was created according to historic drawings and photos of its appearance in 1900. Two years after its opening in 1900 an extensive remodel was undertaken by the new owner. The Victory was re-named for this owner, David Belasco, and again assumed the name Victory in 1914. The theater also had the dubious honor of being the city's first

⁸⁷ Waters, 74

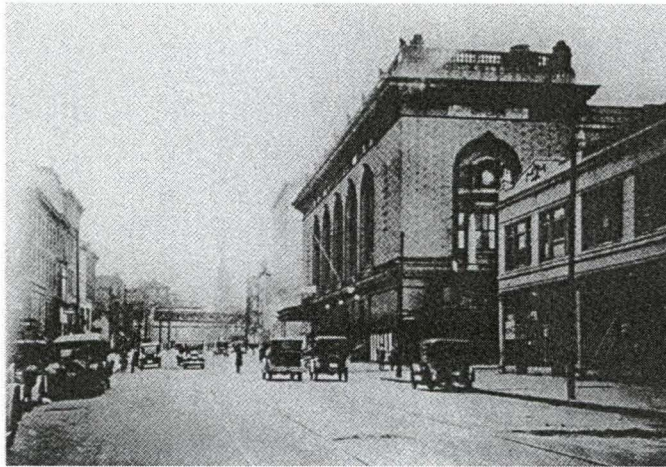
striptease in 1931 and later its first pornographic movie theater. All of the changes the Victory experienced made an existing conditions report a necessity.

The original façade and Belasco's interior were completely restored. However, contemporary requirements facilitate the reading of layers of history, since the support and public spaces are all modern interventions. The concept of the New Victory Theater is to bring people together for performances in a part of town where the younger generation had nowhere to go. Now, live performances have returned and neighborhood residents can now discover theater and experience communal life.⁸⁸



⁸⁸ Hardy, Hugh. "The End of History."

5.4 Victory Theater after restoration.



5.5 Brooklyn Academy's main building before restoration.

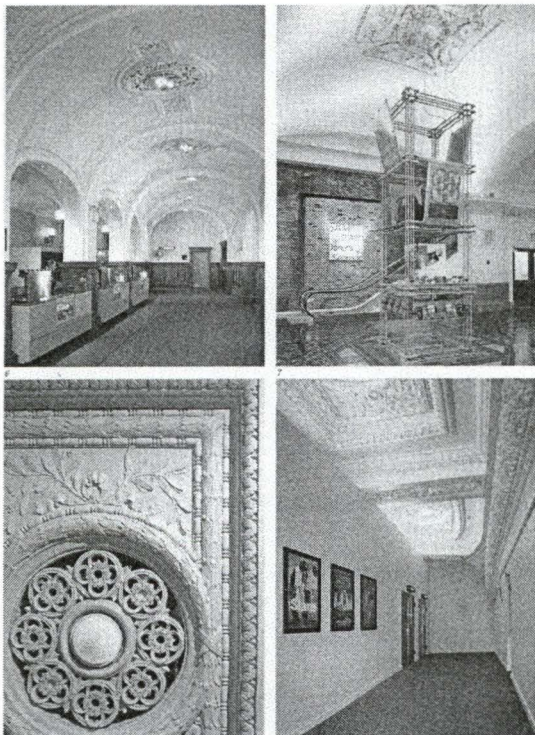
Serving the public while reinvigorating the neighborhood is what makes the Brooklyn Academy of Music campus a successful preservation story. The 1903 structure designed by Herts and Tallant was built to replace the original that had been destroyed by fire. This new building included an opera house, music hall, ballroom, lecture halls, offices, meeting rooms and a lobby which ran the length of the building.⁸⁹ Altered to reflect its changing needs, the space became inconsistent and confusing, and required redesign. As an example of adaptive use, an underutilized playhouse was reconfigured to include four single screen theaters and a public promenade.⁹⁰ A second floor grand space, once a ballroom, was opened up and turned into a café. This re-established its use as specifically for the public, providing a place for both theater goers and community members to gather.

⁸⁹ Waters, 134

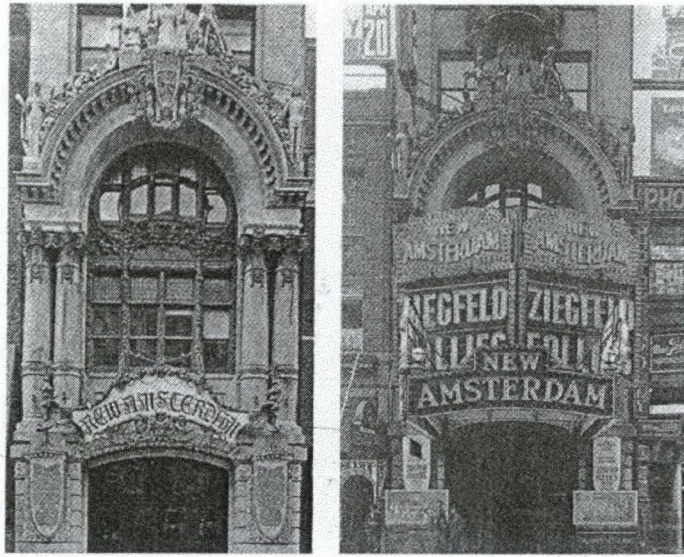
⁹⁰ Waters, 136



5.6 Adaptive use of historic second floor ballroom as café.



5.7 Interior views of restored theater.



5.8 Amsterdam with original art nouveau façade and subsequently added marquee.

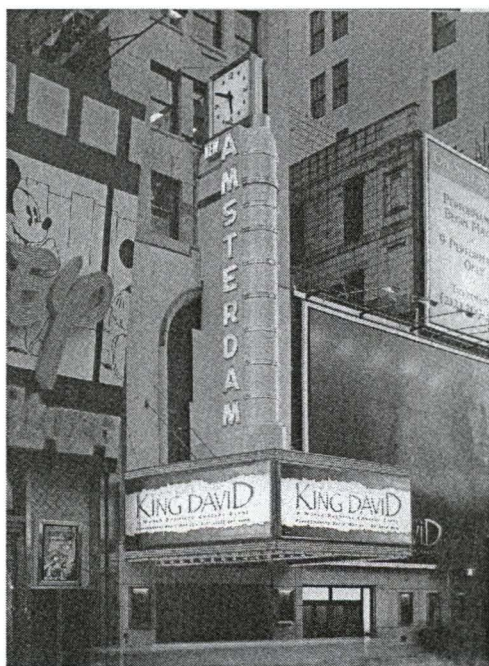
Also in 1903, Herts and Tallant were commissioned to design another theater, the New Amsterdam. Over time, the entry arch of its elaborate art nouveau façade was completely obscured, first by an enormous lighted marquee advertising the Ziegfield Follies, then by a 1930s streamlined entrance and marquee. Subsequently, in 1953, twelve seating boxes were destroyed to make way for a wider screen.⁹¹ The decline of the theater followed that of Times Square, and it eventually stopped showing movies in 1982. The New Amsterdam sat vacant for 10 years before being purchased by the state at the start of a 42nd Street revitalization initiative.⁹²

More than in any of the other examples, the New Amsterdam reflects a conscious decision to *not* return the theater to its original appearance. The original art nouveau entry

⁹¹ Waters, 118

⁹² Waters, 118

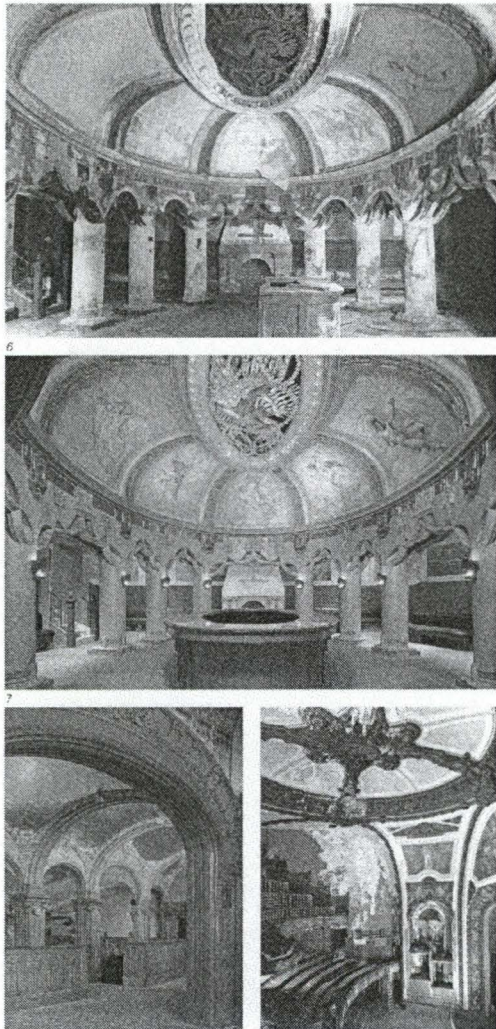
is still concealed behind a newer layer and the 1930s art deco marquee. The design solution represents an interesting facet of the authenticity dilemma. Would stripping away the more modern interventions respect the character which the layering had created? The preservation of various elements introduced through time was approached in different ways. The twelve boxes that had been removed in the 50s were completely reconstructed. Finishes that had completely deteriorated or were only partially recognizable were restored to their early 20th century glory. New lighting, rigging and sound systems were installed so as to not interfere visually with the completed interior. All of the chosen approaches add up to the objective with which the firm began: “interpretive restoration.”⁹³



5.9 The Amsterdam post-facelift.

⁹³ Waters, 118.

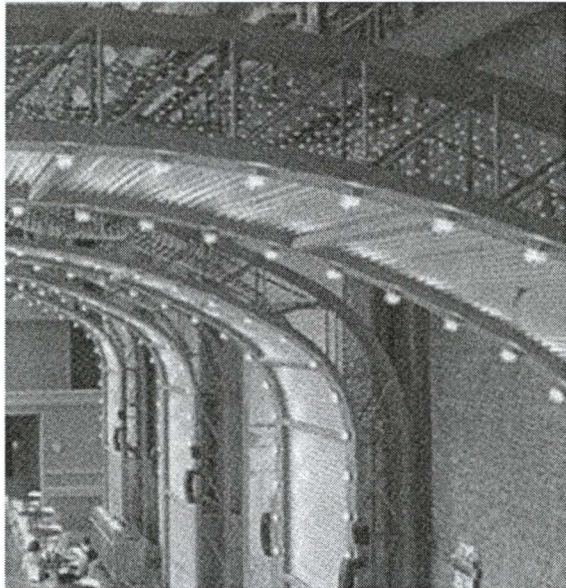
Closely related to the Memminger's story, the Majestic, now Harvey, Theater expresses the passage of time through its treatment of maintained deterioration. The decision to keep parts of this performance space in states of decay "articulates the view that sterile reconstruction destroys the spirit of historic buildings."⁹⁴



5.10 Before and after images of the Majestic interiors.

⁹⁴ Steele, James. *Theater Builders*, Academy Editions, London: 1996. p. 141.

Architecturally, these case studies reveal the ability for the historic and contemporary to co-exist; the resulting dialog further enriches each aspect of the spaces, from the old, intricate detailing to the modern interventions. One example is the BAM café, a space within a space that uses new materials to recall past finishes. Metal, open-truss, illuminated arches mimic the plaster vaults that once decorated the ceiling. In the concession area for the movie screens, new counters were installed within restored arches. This and other responses can be said to express “creative celebration.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, the buildings on which Hardy has worked are not “isolated as timeless abstract monuments but...are vital expressions of their times within the architectural continuum.”⁹⁶



5.11 Detail of metal truss ceiling intervention.

⁹⁵ Waters 17.

⁹⁶ Waters, 17.

As evidenced by their respective preservation approaches, the theaters Hardy displayed were authentic, and recaptured the idea of “singular interaction” on which 19th and 20th century residents of large cities relied to be amused, inspired and awed. It is the association with “public” and memory that makes a similar treatment to the Memminger so significant. As an inner city theater, its continued use is, according to Hardy, “opportunity for civic improvement.” It cannot function as an empty, forgotten space. Hardy emphasizes that “taking back the public realm is crucial,” as well as the determination of the real and authentic. The underlying theme in the preservation of his firm’s theaters, as well as that of the Memminger, is the goal of restoration to *not* turn back the clock or conceal time’s effects, but to create something new for another generation. Executing this preservation approach guarantees that cultural memory will not be lost.

PRESERVATION AND MEMORY

Comparison to other architecture notwithstanding, there is limited written history that reveals the story of the Memminger Auditorium. Perhaps the information that best represents its construction is not in words but images. The available Sanborn Insurance maps reflect the evolution of the site from containing the circa mid-19th century Memminger Normal School and typical single houses, to the empty space that existed before the construction of the current elementary school in 1953. Comparing the 1928 Sanborn to the 1955 edition, we notice that the wholesale destruction of a contributory structure has occurred. The blank space reveals nothing of the emotional response one would expect from the city or those who would have attended the school. It was simply there, and then gone.

The construction of both modern buildings came at the loss of two significant structures which must have been, at the time, regarded with the same amount of importance as that with which we regard the Riviera and Memminger today. The observable dialog now is that between the modern theaters and how the preservation of each relays their, and only their, stories. The identities and associated memories of each are defined by time. We take for granted their existence, as did those who remember the Academy of Music and Memminger Normal School never considered the day that these structures would no longer exist.

Time also results in a tangible characteristic which defines the spaces as much as the ephemeral characteristic of memory: decay. In Bernard Tschumi's *Advertisements for*

Architecture from 1976-79, one ad in particular speaks to the state of the Memminger.

"The most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is.

Architecture only survives where it negates the form that society expects of it. Where it negates itself by transgressing the limits that history has set for it."

⁹⁷ Instead of succumbing to obsolescence, both the Memminger and Riviera were reinvented. The decay at the Memminger, however, is embraced while most signs of age at the Riviera have been eliminated. Arguably, both are equally successful in surpassing their respective original purposes.

The element of decay represents an important aspect of preservation undertaken here. It also plays a role in memory, encouraging active engagement in the authentic ruins within the (theatrically contrived) surroundings. Also necessary in understanding the evolution of the Memminger is a trait often paired with decay: antiquity. Whereas decay is the physical process that shapes an object, site or structure, antiquity is the awareness of the act of decay, or an incongruity when it comes to history.⁹⁸

A sense of antiquity accompanies assessment of the Memminger inside and out; cracking stucco, mildewing paint and missing details indicate decay and create an appealing patina. A similar inspection of the Riviera inspires no such awareness of the 'act of decay.' The Post and Courier notes after its restoration in 1997, "The meticulously restored murals of birds are back on the walls, the recently discovered lobby mural is uncovered, the balcony chairs are completely refurbished, the large plaster comedy and

⁹⁷ As quoted by Kari Jorrmakka. Mical, Thomas, ed. Surrealism and Architecture, Routledge, London: 2005. p. 291.

⁹⁸ Lowenthal, 125.

tragedy masks above the stage have been restored and returned to an appropriate place, the newly lighted marquee is a King Street sight-to-see.”⁹⁹ In the context of antiquity and decay, it makes sense, then, that it is the Riviera that plays home to conventions and conferences and the Memminger that houses the performing arts. The visible deterioration of finishes and structure belongs as a backdrop to the theatrical, whereas a carefully restored, rehabilitated single screen movie house makes a good set for the demands of conference groups and awards presentations.

It can be argued that the history and preservation of a theater space is more likely to be appreciated when the materials are allowed to reflect age. “Besides authenticating or fabricating antiquity, erosion augments interest in its study and concern for its preservation.”¹⁰⁰ Actually *seeing* imperfections is intriguing as part of the periphery of a theater experience. It also adds to the appreciation of maintenance; at the Memminger, it is the idea that part of breaking down the set involves a dismantling of sorts of the building as well. Cyclical changes such as this contribute to the aspect of antiquity. The notions of decay, antiquity, memory and preservation are introduced on the pretense that while rehabilitation was instrumental in saving the Riviera Theater, a less invasive approach might have been successful in engaging a more thorough dialog between its past life as a movie theater and new use as a conference venue. The rehabilitation that occurred, if replicated in the case of the Memminger, would deny the place from realizing the beauty in its inherent complexities.

⁹⁹ Hicks, Ralph. “Love affair with Riviera has happy ending.” Post and Courier: 3 May 1997; A12.

¹⁰⁰ Lowenthal, 153.

The roles of both the Riviera and Memminger have adapted to fit contemporary needs, representing the theater as a building typology which is “able to accommodate itself to a variety of urban functions as the city around it has changed.”¹⁰¹ The over sixty years that separate the construction of each space with present day Charleston comprise a complex time in the city’s history which is both underrepresented architecturally and underappreciated academically. Behemoths that are tolerated but not admired stylistically, buildings such as the Charleston Museum and Galliard Auditorium, the old Charleston County Library and Mendel Rivers Building, are products of urban renewal. As far as new uses are concerned, the first pair continues to service the city as intended, but the fate of the library and federal building are as yet undecided. The feasibility of their adaptive use is not nearly as clear as the Riviera and Memminger.

The introduction of the Memminger Auditorium and Riviera Theater to the city’s commercial and retail core also illustrates renewal. In the case of the former, an independent committee realized the value of an auditorium space that worked as a cultural, educational and community center. The Memminger’s construction meant the preservation and maintenance of a new--and old--neighborhood. Its classical language housed old art forms of music and live performance, while the Riviera’s brilliant marquee and exotic murals contained the drama of the cinema. Other movie houses certainly existed in downtown Charleston at the time, once as many as a dozen, but the Riviera was one of a kind.

¹⁰¹ Carlson, Marvin. Places of Performance, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989.

Whereas the preservation of the Riviera reflects straightforward adaptive use methodology, the Memminger Auditorium's interior allows for a solution whereby it becomes a permanently temporary space; it is never truly preserved to one moment in time. In 2000, Spoleto Festival USA tapped the potential of the Memminger by offering a concert whose theme was, fittingly, the history of industrialization in the last century.¹⁰² It was the first performance the building had witnessed in many years and with it began the transformation of the once classically detailed interior. The historic façade becomes a stage for what transpires inside. The Memminger is being adaptively used *and* experiences continuous adaptation. The stewardship of the Spoleto Festival has opened interpretation of the structure itself as not just a place for performances, but performance architecture as art.

Arthur Cotton Moore most concisely presents the idea of complex adaptive reuse by putting it in context with Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. While Venturi argues that artistic tension and multiple interpretations are products of complexity, Moore notes that the architectural results of this idea are often not as successful as they could be. The actualization of this theory could be accomplished, Moore notes, by applying a "freer style of preservation."¹⁰³ This style allows for combination of materials, colors and forms of the past and present. Combining historic fabric with contemporary treatments would give "a purpose to the complexity, producing a clarity to the observer that invites further exploration and appreciation of the

¹⁰² Behre, Robert. "Memminger tapped for Spoleto." Post and Courier, 22 January 2000.

¹⁰³ Moore, 47.

full aesthetic effect.”¹⁰⁴ The resulting authenticity had the ability to take abandoned buildings like the Memminger and turn them into “components of a force for the revitalization of our cities.”¹⁰⁵

The new stage sets and associated structures created for performances in the Memminger Auditorium are interventions autonomous to the building, but create a dialog with it yielding “a heightened understanding of the historic material with which they are joined.”¹⁰⁶ Each subsequent play or opera helps establish a new memory, one not associated with old events but that invites new interpretation of architecture and performance, envelope and contents. Such interpretive meaning “can be achieved through contrast and distinction” or through “a system of references and interrelationships, mimetic elements, and even very abstract spatial and structural patterns.”¹⁰⁷

By examining the significance of a post-Depression era cinema and auditorium in the context of preservation directions today, the goal of the validity of saving the recent past in a manner conducive to contemporary needs can be realized. From a surrealist point of view, preservation methods can be defined through aspects of “space.” Interpretation of space is the responsibility of the viewer; by contrasting with a distinct frame of reference, the reality of Memminger’s interior becomes skewed. The original fabric is still there, but associations have changed, and along with it, the building’s

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Moore, Arthur Cotton. Powers of Preservation, McGraw-Hill, New York: 1998. p. 46.

¹⁰⁷ Moore 47.

reality. As surrealist author and lecturer Dr. Silvano Levy writes, "Space, after all, is defined through the architecture that contains it, as well as the architecture that is contained within it."¹⁰⁸

What is it about theaters? They have the ability to incite emotion more than other building typologies. There is the idea of becoming part of something bigger than the immediate. Their use is not about commodity; it is about perpetuity: occupying a place that one always wants to exist. Continuity of presence can be ensured by what Moore calls "experimental design" and, ideally, the preservation community's acceptance of it.¹⁰⁹ They should be especially tolerant, he says, when "such design still serves to highlight and celebrate the old fabric and when the old part is a useful mediator between the new interventions and the existing neighborhood."¹¹⁰ Given that there has been a proposal to develop the lot adjacent to the Memminger, the building and its context are very relevant to his idea. Additionally, although Moore's idea refers to the treatment of an addition or intervention to a historic structure and how it is perceived from the street, the concept of "mediator" is obviously applicable to the Memminger's interior.

The clarity of the inside/outside relationship of the Riviera does not reference the surrealists' obsession with imagination or the irrational. The experience that the preservation approach of the Memminger creates is embodied in surrealist Andre Breton's statement: "the marvelous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities

¹⁰⁸ Mical, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Moore, 213.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

without departing from the realm of our experience, of bringing them together, and drawing a spark from their contact...and of disorienting us in our memory by depriving us of a frame of reference.”¹¹¹

The success in the Memminger Auditorium’s preservation is its result of juxtaposing past and present; the story it conveys is multi-dimensional. Looking at the Memminger through the lens of surrealism, the architecture has assumed a life of its own. With live performance, sometimes the experience itself is enough to attract the audience. Perhaps the “box construct” established by the Memminger structure results in the same effect, where the architecture, like a memory, needs no explanation. The solution for this modern performance space is timeless; it is a metaphor for theater itself.

¹¹¹ McShine, Kynaston, ed. Joseph Cornell. The Museum of Modern Art, New York: 1990. p.16.

APPENDIX

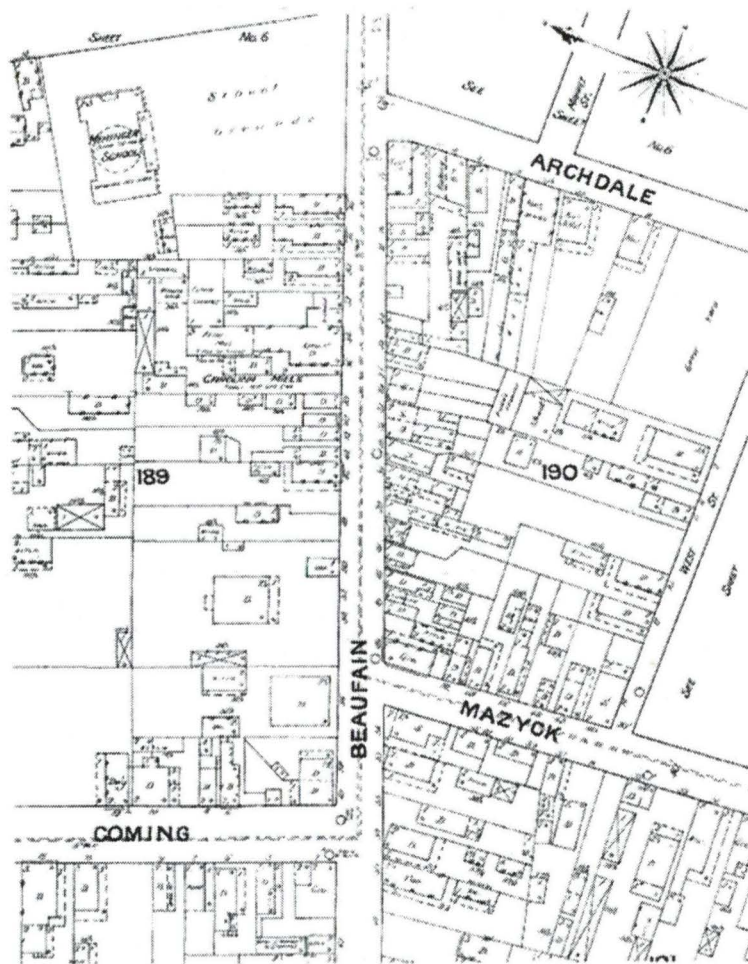


Figure 1. 1888 Sanborn map of Memminger and neighborhood.



Figure 2. 1902 Sanborn map of Memminger and neighborhood.

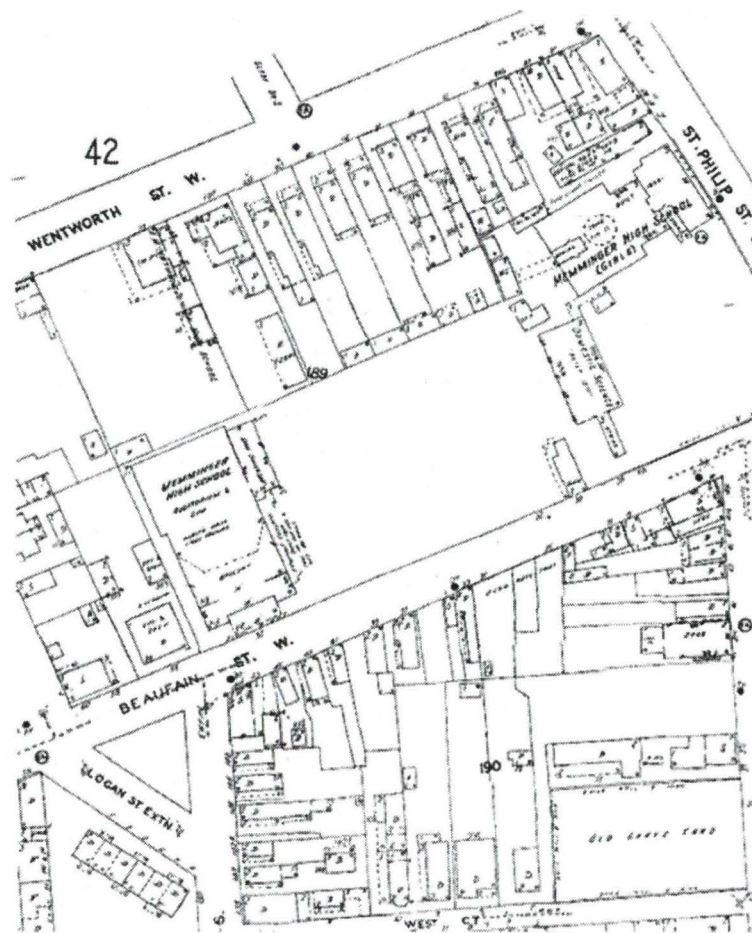


Figure 3. 1942 Sanborn map of Memminger and neighborhood.

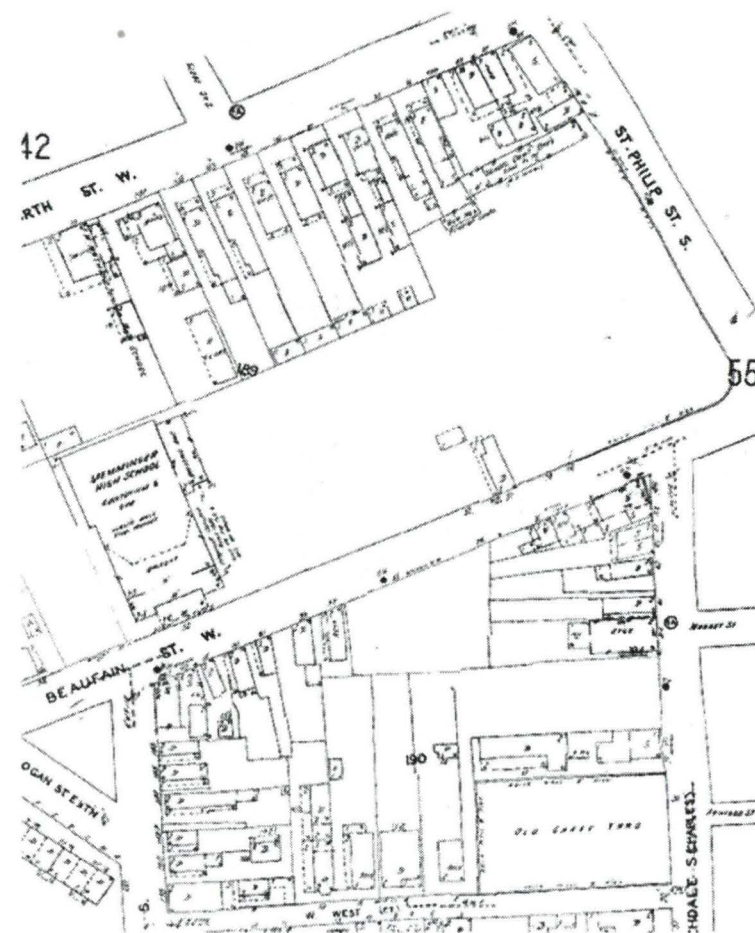


Figure 4. 1955 Sanborn map of Memminger and neighborhood.

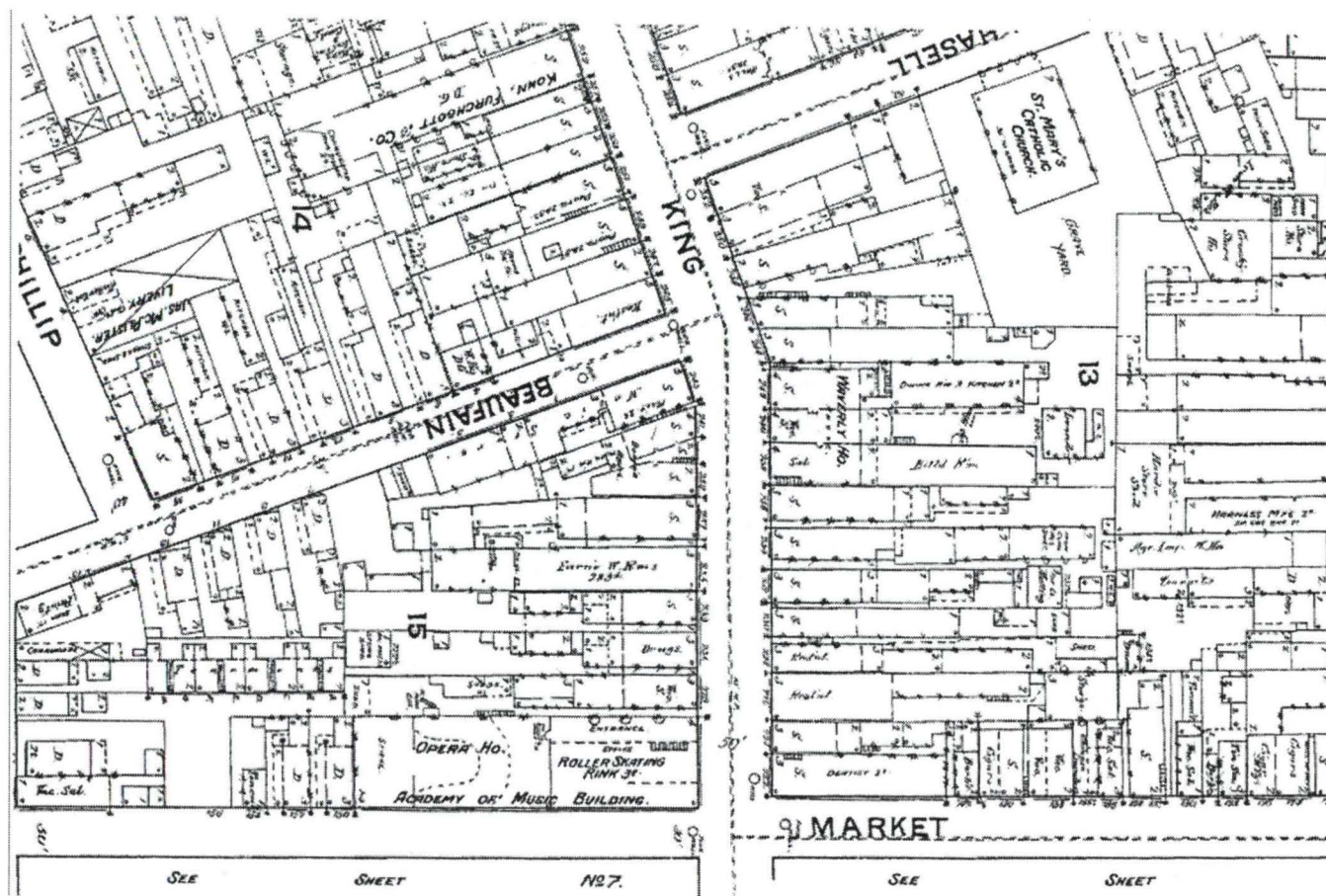


Figure 5. 1888 Sanborn map of Academy of Music and neighborhood.

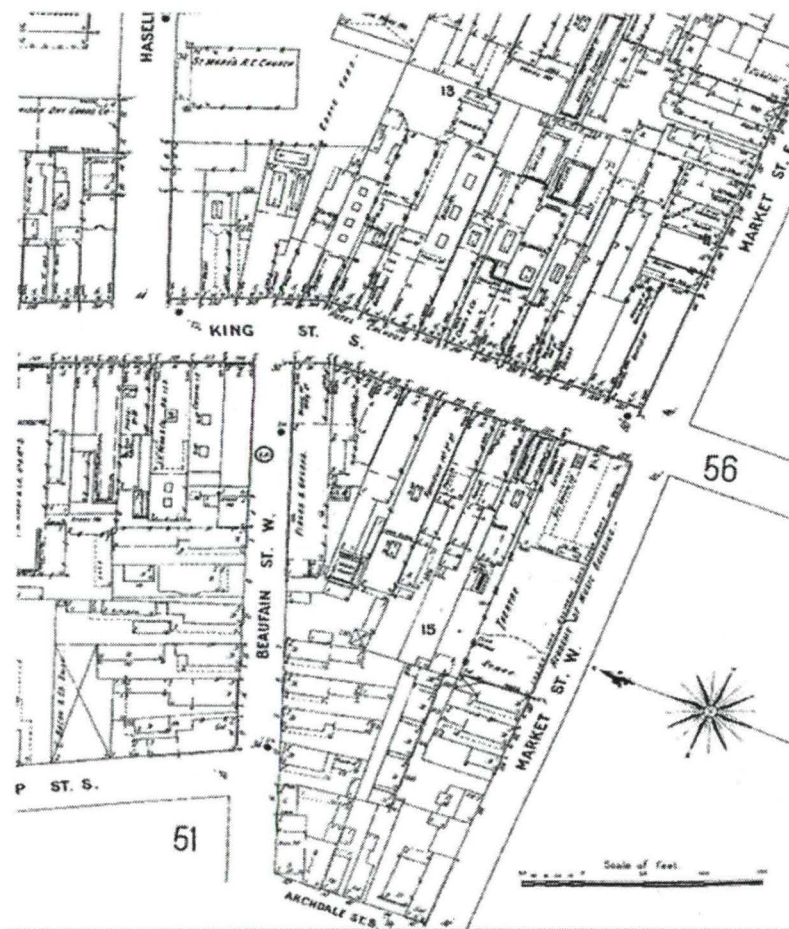


Figure 6. 1902 Sanborn map of Academy of Music and neighborhood.

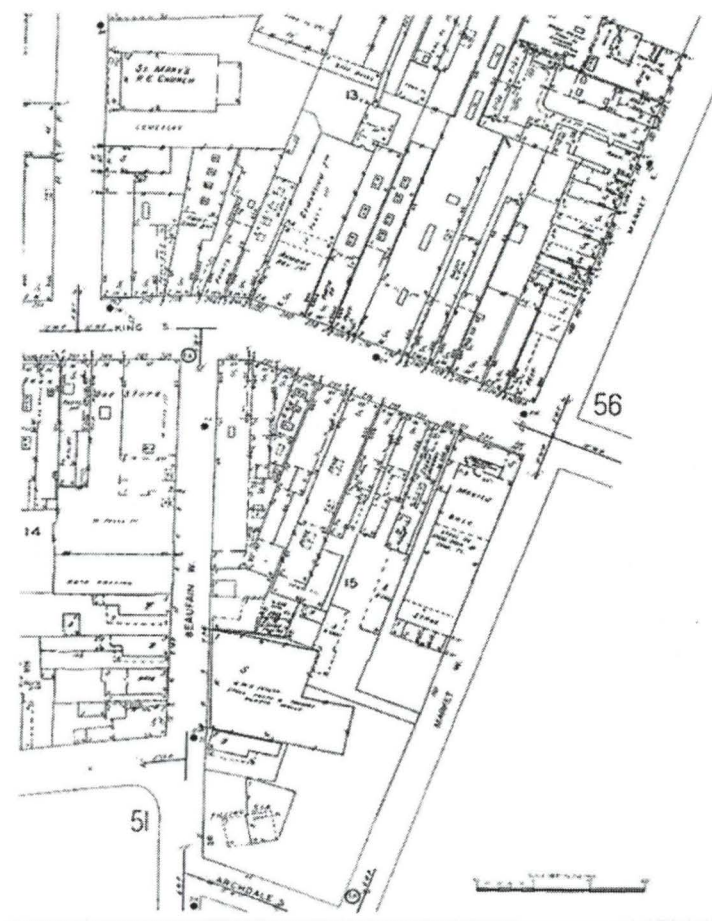


Figure 7. 1941 Sanborn map of Riviera Theater and neighborhood.



Figure 8. 1942 Sanborn map of Riviera Theater and neighborhood.

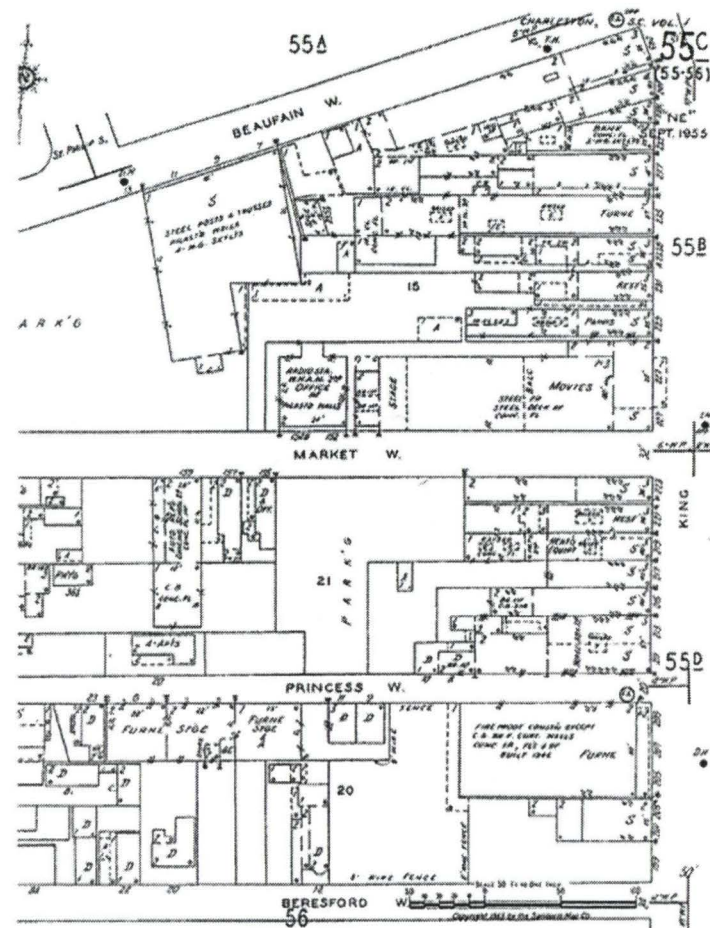


Figure 9. 1955 Sanborn map of Riviera Theater and neighborhood.

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